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SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS' USE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A CHANGING EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

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SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS' USE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A CHANGING EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

By

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Dedication

I dedicate this scholarly work to my Little Oma, Norma Sarah (Wendel) Frantzen. You were the matriarch of our family and one of my best first teachers. You taught me the value of work, humility, perseverance, and pride in accomplishment. I miss you dearly and feel your love always.

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by

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The purpose of this study was to determine how superintendents conduct strategic planning in a changing educational environment. The literature suggests that superintendents must adjust to a new playing field that requires using already limited resources not only to educate students, but also position their schools as desirable in the market of public opinion. While the literature identified strategic planning as a valuable practice in educational leadership, very little research was available that provided a pragmatic view of how superintendents engage in the process.

Superintendents involved in this basic qualitative study were able to identify the key components used for strategic planning, how other factors influenced the process, and how they linked the work of the strategic plan to action. The study participants all engaged in an entry plan process prior to beginning strategic planning. The information gathered from the entry plan helped the superintendents determine their next actions and, in several circumstances, formed the basis for the strategic plan. Learning about the culture and context of the district provided the superintendents with the information they needed to frame the strategic planning process in a

way that would be well received, identify and involve a representative group of stakeholders, and design and implement a process that met the needs of the district.

Superintendent experience, the needs of the district, and state and federal requirements also emerged as factors influencing strategic planning. Seven common components were represented in the approaches that the superintendents took in the strategic planning process: (a) determine board and community readiness, (b) utilize an external facilitation agent, (c) identify and involve stakeholders, (d) develop a shared vision, (e) determine priorities and goals, (f) develop strategies, and (g) solicit feedback and communicate through the process. Alignment of the strategies to the vision, goals, and priorities emerged as a key finding and served as parameters that empowered innovation and creativity. Linking the work of the strategic plan to action and monitoring progress happened through district and campus plans, superintendent evaluations, board and executive leadership retreats, goal-tracking documents, and campus visits, among other things.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Superintendents are faced with the need to find innovative ways to respond to a changing educational landscape. They must adjust to a new playing field that requires using already limited resources to not only educate students, but also to position their schools as desirable in the market of public opinion (Lane, Bishop, & Wilson-Jones, 2005; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002). Eacott (2010) explained that the market ideology of today's legislative educational environment links "economic prosperity with student achievement, [and, therefore] the relationship between school leadership and society moves beyond the mere instruction of children toward a greater level of interdependence" (p. 425). The demands for increased student performance as measured by standardized tests, and a market-based environment that provides choice for students and parents, adds pressure to an already stressful job of school district leadership (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kowalski, McCord, Peters, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Lane et al., 2005; Olivarez, 2013; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002).

Managing the multiple demands of school district leadership involves finding a balance between internal and external inputs to guide decisions and ensure movement toward a shared vision and accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; W. G. Hambright, 1999; Lewthwaite, 2006; Olivarez, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Indeed, the movement toward increasing accountability for schools, coupled with pressure to privatize education, has contributed to an increased interest in school management from parents, community members, and legislators (Eacott, 2010; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002).

Strategic planning is suggested in the literature as an important part of today's educational leadership landscape (Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lane et al., 2005; Russell, 2014; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002; Villerot,

2014; Zohrabi & Manteghi, 2011). Eacott (2010) emphasized the increasing pressures to engage in strategic thinking and planning in education as a product of "governments encourage[ing] an enterprising culture in the delivery of education" (p. 425). Strategic planning is a method superintendents can employ to find innovative and creative solutions to problems in the face of increased competition, scrutiny, and accountability (Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002). This study will examine how school district leaders use strategic planning to make decisions and take action in a changing educational landscape.

Background of Strategic Planning: Military, Business, and Higher Education

The roots of strategic planning can be traced to ancient military structures and systems. Mintzberg (1994b) cited *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, with a reference to a "Director of Strategic Planning" in a 2,400-year-old manuscript. The term *strategy* is derived from the Greek word *strategos,* or general of the army. For example, upper-level military leaders provided strategic advice to field officers in pursuit of big picture goals, such as taking over nations or seizing land. Middle-level officers devised the tactical plans and activated troops toward achieving the larger, strategic goal (Blackerby, 1993; W. G. Hambright, 1999).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the top-down structures and systems developed around strategic planning in the military translated to governmental and business entities titled *long-range planning*. Military leaders tended to enter these arenas of leadership upon detachment from the military (Blackerby, 1993; W. G. Hambright, 1999; Mintzberg, 1994a). During this era, long-range planning was primarily a function of budgeting and facilities planning (Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004; Steiner, 1979).

As strategic planning evolved, companies hired people to be planners and created departments specifically tasked with guiding the planning process (Mintzberg, 1994b). Henry Mintzberg (1994a), scholar of strategic planning and Cleghorn Professor of Management Studies at McGill University, wrote that strategic planning entered other areas of the business scene in the mid-1960s when "corporate leaders embraced [formal strategic planning structures] as 'the one best way' to devise and implement strategies that would enhance the competitiveness of each business unit" (p. 107).

In the late 1970s through the early 1990s, corporate executives were faced with quickly changing business environments that included increasing global competition and consumer awareness of social and environmental concerns (Mintzberg, 1994a). These pressures required businesses to seek more nimble methods of strategic planning that allowed for viable ideas to move more quickly from inception to implementation (Ansoff & Sullivan, 1993; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998).

In their study of strategic planning in higher education, Dooris, Kelley, and Trainer (2004) described strategic planning in the 1950s as primarily related to facilities and space planning. In the 1980s, it was a "rational tool for orderly, systemic advancement of the academic enterprise" (Dooris et al., 2004, p. 7). As the practice in higher education has evolved, it has grown into a process that includes a cultural, environmental, and political perspectives; therefore, it is increasingly about learning and creativity and has shifted focus from plan formulation to implementation (Dooris et al., 2004). This more flexible and inclusive model of strategic planning mirrors what was happening in business in the early 1990s as executives recognized the value of decentralizing or deformalizing the process in order to strategize more effectively (Lane et al., 2005; Mintzberg, 1994a; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008).

Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998) built a framework from the business literature that organized the various theories and thought processes around strategic planning into 10 schools of strategy formation. These schools are categorized into either *prescriptive*, which are more formal, and *descriptive*, which are less formal. The prescriptive category includes the design, planning, and positioning schools of strategy formation. The descriptive category includes the cognitive, configuration, cultural, entrepreneurial, environmental, learning, and political schools (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) contended that sometimes formalized processes rely too heavily on and emphasize quantitative data at the expense of the subtle nuances that qualitative information can provide. Therefore, executives should consider designing leadership and communication systems in their organizations that are aligned through formal structures, but also allow for innovative ideas dervived in other ways to rise to a level of actionable importance (Dooris et al., 2004; Mintzberg et al., 1998).

With its roots in ancient military organizations, strategic planning has evolved from a prescribed, top-down practice to the more flexible, reciprocal process. Military, business, and higher education organizations use strategic planning processes as part of a need to find innovative solutions to problems in an ever-changing world. Consequently, strategic planning has evolved into the process of leading K–12 education.

Background of Strategic Planning in K–12 Education

The earliest accounts of strategic planning in K–12 education appear in the late 1980s as part of a movement toward decentralizing decision-making and emphasizing educational outputs (Fidler, 2002; Brazer, Rich, & Ross, 2010). Strategic planning has become widely accepted as a beneficial practice, although a clear and agreed upon definition or process is not apparent

(Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002; Villerot, 2014; Zohrabi & Manteghi, 2011). Despite this disagreement over definition, most do agree that the process involves a level of system analysis or evaluation that includes input from stakeholders as well as the articulation of vision, mission, and goals, action planning, and monitoring of implementation and outcomes. The strategic planning process in K–12 education has been described as linear, cyclical, and relational with arguments for and against strict adherence to a series of steps in succession (Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2008b). Regardless of the definition or the reality of the process, strategic planning provides a road map for school district leaders to clearly articulate the plan for continued improvement in an era of increased accountability and scrutiny (Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2008b; Lane et al., 2005; Russell, 2014; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002).

Bolman and Deal (2008) described strategic planning as primarily symbolic because "an organization without a plan can be labeled as reactive, short-sighted, and rudderless. Planning, then, is an essential ceremony which organizations conduct periodically to maintain legitimacy" (p. 302). In their study of strategic planning in education, G. Hambright and Diamantes (2004) asserted the presence of a "symbiotic relationship between strategic planning and participative management" because "management maintains its responsibility for overall direction, but the planning team includes broad representation of stakeholder groups" (p. 235). This symbiotic relationship may be important in the era of market-style education choice for students and parents. A strategic plan communicates a level of thoughtfulness and organized thinking to the community, parents, students, and staff (Bolman & Deal, 2008; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005).

Villerot (2014) studied superintendent entry plans and identified strategic planning as a next step and contributing factor to the longevity of a superintendent. Superintendent longevity is important to the stability of a school district and the ability to institute and sustain long-term reform efforts, which typically require a 5- to 10-year allotment (Fullan, 2001; Russell, 2014; Villerot, 2014). Lane et al. (2005) asserted that laying out a strategic plan for a period of 5 years benefits stakeholders because through strategic planning, the needs as well as the "vision, mission, and beliefs for the school district" are clearly stated (p. 198). Additionally, school district leaders use the plan as a road map for attaining a "desired future; the plan provides a path which allows the community to work together to accomplish the goals, objectives, and activities that constitute the strategic plan" (Lane et al., 2005, p. 198). Finally, the strategic plan offers the opportunity for understanding the functioning of school districts and their finances "and allows the school district to set specific data-driven priorities" (Lane et al., 2005, p. 198). Espinosa (2009) studied superintendents' perceptions of strategic planning and found that superintendents perceive the strategic planning process as effective when the results include shared vision and a holistic, inclusive focus "on the strategic goals" and the alignment of effort with "everyone providing greater impact and efficiency in implementing the district's strategic plan" (p. 216).

The purported benefits of strategic planning are counterbalanced with a set of challenges in the K–12 arena. Inadequate funding, time, commitment to the process, and the subsequent action plan implementation, as well as organizational inflexibility, inadequate stakeholder participation, poor communication, and a lack of belief in the need for change all present barriers to strategic planning (Eacott, 2008b; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; W. G. Hambright, 1999).

W. G. Hambright (1999) found that while superintendents in Texas value the strategic planning process and rated external input from stakeholders as important, many are uncomfortable with the components of external inputs and involvement. A district's lack of fitness, or readiness, to undertake the strategic planning process, a drop in stakeholder participation as the process wears on, and the superintendent's inadequate preparation and training in how to conduct the process also can contribute to failure (Espinosa, 2009).

While many models of strategic planning methodology exist, very little empirical research on the effectiveness of one model over the other or on field examples to guide superintendents through implementation has been provided (Eacott, 2008b, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). Eacott (2008b) argued that the emphasis in current analyses of strategic planning has been on the formulation of the strategy and not the implementation. Eacott (2008b) contended that little analysis has been conducted on school district leaders' perceptions about the methods for engaging in the strategic planning process for making decisions and taking action. In addition, Eacott (2008a) claimed that while a multitude of scholarly definitions of strategic planning in education abound, very little research has included the perspective of the practitioner, and therefore, no common conceptual framework exists. Eacott (2008b) called for researchers to learn how practitioners define strategic planning and how they use it to take action in their role.

G. Hambright and Diamantes (2004) noted that no guide has been generated to provide practitioners with straightforward procedures for linking strategic plans to operational tactics, or action plans. In addition, superintendents and their executive leadership teams may not have the training or expertise required to conduct the strategic planning process (Espinosa, 2009). Often the strategic planning work is done poorly with little deep thought over too short a period. As a

result, the notebook holding the paper copy of the plan tends to remain closed on a shelf, and the organization tends not to experience its thorough implementation with monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment (G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; W. G. Hambright, 1999; Lane et al., 2005).

Superintendents are tasked with the leadership of a multifaceted organization entrusted to them by the public (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005; Olivarez, 2013). Callahan (1966) described the role of the superintendent as that of a teacher, business leader, social scientist, and statesman. Kowalski (2005) added the role of superintendent as communicator. Olivarez (2013) described the responsibilities of a superintendent as fulfilling 10 critical functions for his or her school districts:

> (1) governance operations; (2) curriculum and instruction; (3) elementary and secondary campus operations; (4) instructional support services; (5) human resources; (6) administrative, finance, and business operations; (7) facilities planning and plant services; (8) accountability, information management, and technology services; (9) external and internal communications; and (10) operational support systems–safety and security, food services, and transportation. (p. 12)

The role of the superintendent is complicated by an increased demand for transparency and accountability in a market-based educational climate. Espinosa (2009) identified strategic planning as a tool for effective management of a school district as a "total system approach" (p. 203). To be effective, the superintendent must "dialogue with the district's diverse stakeholders and change the strategic direction of the whole system" (p. 203).

Problem Statement

Based on the literature, strategic planning is a process which superintendents can employ to create a road map that clearly articulates a plan for continued improvement. Strategic

planning is beneficial both symbolically and practically in an era of increased accountability and scrutiny of educational organizations for school district image and stability. Strategic planning is not directly linked to improved student achievement but is an attributing factor to superintendent longevity. The longevity of a superintendent and the accompanying district stability are linked to the successful implementation of school reform initiatives as well as to improved student achievement. The gaps in the research indicate a lack of understanding of how superintendents implement the strategic planning process toward decision-making and action in K–12 education.

Purpose for Research

This study examined how superintendents use strategic planning to make decisions and take action in a changing educational landscape. Specifically, this study explored what superintendents with 5 or more years of experience identified as the key components of strategic planning and how they managed the process through actionable decision-making and goals.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do superintendents who engage in strategic planning identify as key components to strategic planning implementation?
2. How do superintendents who engage in strategic planning mange the formal and informal processes?
3. What role do other factors, such as politics, environment, superintendent experience, systems, and structures, have on the strategic planning and strategy formation process?
4. How do superintendents who engage in strategic planning link the strategic planning process to implement action and change throughout the district?

Significance of the Research

This study's significance involved its ability to yield insight from the point of view of the leader-practitioner tasked with carrying out the work. Superintendents with this perspective may help other educational leaders navigate the strategic planning process in this era of increased scrutiny and accountability. The findings could inform superintendent preparation programs.

Chapter 2: Evolution of Strategic Planning

The practice of strategic planning began in business around the 1950s and gained widespread acceptance and use through the 1970s in response to a new level of affluence, discretionary buying power, and increased social and environmental awareness in the post-industrial era. Increasingly demanding customers expected higher levels of accountability, quality, and social responsibility from businesses and companies (Ansoff, 1988; Mintzberg, 1994a). Similarly, changing landscapes in education beginning in the early 1980s resulted in a trend toward incorporating the business-like practices of developing an organizational vision, strategic planning, gathering customer input, and observing market trends into educational administration (Dimmock & Walker, 2004; Eacott, 2008a, 2008b; Fidler, 2002; Brazer et al., 2010).

While the basic tenets of strategic planning have not changed significantly in the literature over the years, the methods by which strategic planning is carried out have been a topic of scholarly discussion (Ansoff, 1988; Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2008b; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg, 1994a; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). In its inception, strategic planning processes were designed for relatively stable economic and political environments that allowed for processes that took time (Ansoff, 1988; Mintzberg, 1994a). Modern climates in both business and education require leaders to respond more quickly, but no less accurately, to changing environments and unexpected challenges (Eacott, 2010; Fullan, 2001; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

In this chapter, I first define strategic planning, including critical attributes and models. Next, I examine the documented benefits and drawbacks within the research literature. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the role of the superintendent in strategic planning in education.

Strategic Planning Defined

The term strategic planning is often used in both the popular press and the literature to describe a wide range of planning activities that result in the formation of strategies (Ansoff, 1988; Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Strategies are defined as actionable items designed to move a group, company, or organization toward the accomplishment of goals or objectives (Eacott, 2008b; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). In this section, I will review the various ways in which strategic planning has been described in the management literature. I first will make a distinction between long-range and strategic planning and then offer a definition of strategic planning based on the literature.

Long-Range Planning

Long-range planning is defined in the literature as an internally generated process focused on the goals and priorities of the organization through action planning and progress monitoring but is typically described in the literature in the context of budget and facilities planning. Long-range planning is often cited as a precursor to strategic planning (Ansoff, 1988; Dooris et al., 2004; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005). Based on a study of business strategy formation, Ansoff (1988) described long-range planning as concerned with confirming the organization's historical context and not threatening the established power structure. In general, long-range plans were not innovative, disruptive, or forward thinking, but instead were designed to keep the company moving along the same path from whence it came with the same leadership in place.

G. Hambright and Diamantes (2004) summarized long-range planning in the education literature as a top-down closed process that assumes rationality and stability for 5–10 years in the

future. Based on a study of strategic planning in education, Chang (2006) asserted that organizational leaders assume the organization has stability within a non-changing environment as part of long-range planning; however, for strategic planning, organizational leaders assume the environment is dynamic and changing, requiring responsiveness in planning.

Strategic Planning

While an exact definition is not agreed upon in the business nor the education literature, strategic planning is referred to generally as the processes by which leaders develop strategies to respond to changing environments (Ansoff, 1988; Chaffee, 1985; Chang, 2006; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). Strategic planning, as described by Ansoff (1988) in a study of corporations, is concerned with aligning internal decision-making with the external factors that impact companies or organizations. "The strategic problem is concerned with establishing an 'impedance match' between the firm and its environment" (Ansoff, 1988, p. 6). An impedance match implies that the two forces—internal and external—are matched in force or intensity to create an optimum outcome. This alignment is important so that the internal strategy is an appropriate and effective response to the external pressure (Ansoff, 1988).

G. Hambright and Diamantes (2004) provided a list of 15 definitions of educational strategic planning from the educational literature that can provide "insights into the concept's underlying premises" (p. 233). The literature suggests that unlike long-range planning, strategic planning is characterized by involvement from all levels of the organization and is structured to address issues and structures that may lead to changes in the status quo in order to address short-term and long-term goals (Ansoff, 1988; Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). Therefore, strategic planning is designed to support leaders' efforts

to respond to current and future needs of the organization in an ever-changing environment (Ansoff, 1988; Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Even though strategic planning began in military organizations centuries ago, its evolution and application in the business arena may prove parallel to the market-based environment in which school districts currently operate which involves attracting customers like businesses (Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg, 1994b). School district superintendents then are charged with the task of determining how to choose and implement the strategic planning process that best meets the needs of their school districts (Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004).

Models and Critical Attributes of Strategic Planning

The interplay between an organization's internal goals and objectives and the external factors applying pressure on the organization are reflected in the models of strategic planning described in the literature (Ansoff, 1988; Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2008b; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg, 1994a; Mintzberg et al., 1998). In studies of strategic planning in business organizations and review of the management literature, Mintzberg et al. (1998) broadly categorized strategic planning models as prescriptive or descriptive.

In delineating these two categories of strategic planning, Mintzberg et al. (1998) sought to make the point that there is not one right way to think about or implement strategic planning. These models, or schools of thought (see Table 1), have different implications for both the ways in which organizations go about planning, and the way in which they execute those plans (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). As illustrated in this review, these models have been documented in the business literature, but few researchers in the educational literature

have ventured beyond the strategic planning models that Mintzberg et al. (1998) defined as prescriptive.

Table 1

Mintzberg et al.'s 10 Schools of Thought on Strategy Formation

Type	School	View of Process
Prescriptive	Design	Conceptual
	Planning	Formal
	Positioning	Analytical
Descriptive	Cognitive	Mental
	Configuration	Episodic/Transformational
	Cultural	Ideological/Collective
	Entrepreneurial	Visionary
	Environmental	Passive/Reactive
	Learning	Emergent
	Political	Power/Negotiation

Prescriptive strategic planning models are characterized by a delineation of step-by-step processes from which strategies should emerge at the appointed time in the process. Descriptive strategic planning models are less structured and describe thought processes and contextual activities that create an environment for strategy formation (Mintzberg, 1994b; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Strategy formation, as defined by Mintzberg et al. (1998), is the process by which strategies are actually designed, which can happen in a multitude of ways based on the stakeholders involved in the formation process.

Prescriptive Models in Business

Prescriptive is a categorical term used in the business literature to describe strategic planning models that are focused more on a specific process of strategy formation rather than the strategies that are created (Mintzberg, 1994b; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Similarly, in education, the linear or cyclical models prescribe a specific process of strategic planning (Chang, 2006; Cook, 2001; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) grouped the design, planning, and positioning schools into the prescriptive category. They explained that even though each of these schools adds something to the literature, the most common prescriptive model for strategic planning can be summarized as follows:

> Take the SWOT model, divide it into neatly delineated steps, articulate each of these with lots of checklists and techniques, and give special attention to the setting of objectives on the front end and the elaboration of budgets and operating plans on the back end. (p. 49)

In this section, the three schools of strategy formation that Mintzberg et al. (1998) categorized as prescriptive appear. Then, the three models of strategic planning found in the education literature are discussed in terms of how they resemble the models represented in the prescriptive category.

The design school. The term SWOT is the analysis of an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and is attributed to the design school (Mintzberg et al., 1998). The SWOT method is still widely used and respected as a tool for strategic planning in businesses and educational institutions worldwide (Agarwal, Grassl, & Pahl, 2012; Cook, 2001; Helms & Nixon, 2010; Vaněk, Mikoláš, & Žváková, 2014). Strengths and weaknesses are part of an internal analysis to determine competencies while opportunities and threats are part of an

external appraisal that provide insight into key success factors. Information gathered in these analyses are aggregated through the lens of the managerial values and social responsibilities of the organization to create strategies (Helms & Nixon, 2010; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Vaněk et al., 2014) as seen in Figure 1.

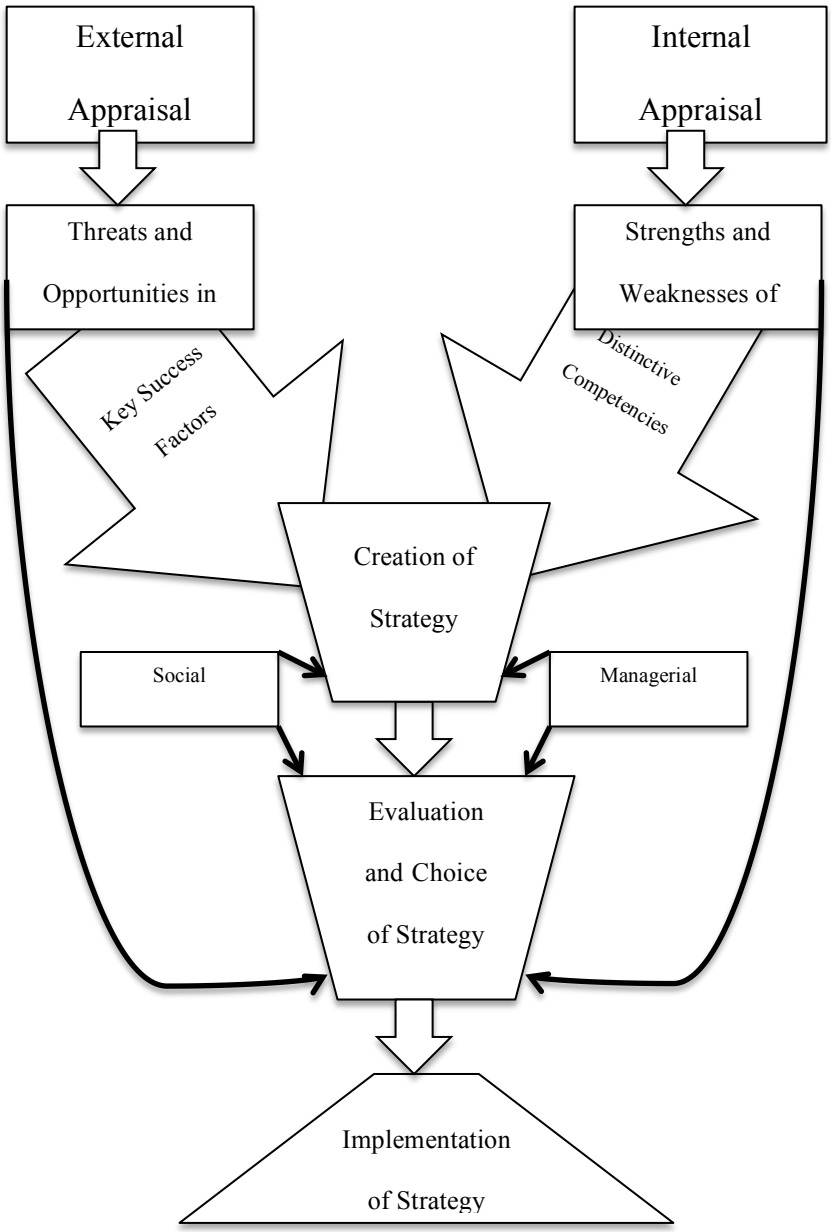


Figure 1. Visualization of the SWOT process.

The most common tool for examining information gathered through a SWOT analysis is the SWOT matrix. The SWOT matrix organizes the information into four categories of factors combinations: (a) strengths and opportunities (S-O); (b) strengths and threats (S-T); (c) weaknesses and threats (W-T); and (d) weaknesses and opportunities (W-O) (Ghazinoory, Zadeh, & Memariani, 2007; Vaněk et al., 2014). This list of factors is evaluated and choices are made to determine the focus for strategy creation and subsequent implementation (Helms & Nixon, 2010; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Vaněk et al., 2014).

Even though it has been used in business and education for decades, the SWOT method and its accompanying matrix have been criticized for its inability to prioritize, quantify, and provide a precise analysis of factors (Agarwal et al., 2012; Ghazinoory et al., 2007; Helms & Nixon, 2010; Vaněk et al., 2014). In a meta-analysis of more than 140 studies, Helms and Nixon (2010) identified five weaknesses in the SWOT analysis. These weaknesses implied that SWOT is (a) a vague and oversimplified methodology; (b) dependent on the thoroughness and expertise of the brainstorming team; (c) unclear in the classification of variables into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats; (d) unable to provide strategic direction; and (e) provides no methodology for quantification, such as weighting, ranking, or prioritizing (Helms & Nixon, 2010).

To mitigate these shortcomings, the literature mentioned other analysis tools have been used in conjunction with the SWOT matrix. These tools and methods discussed in the literature included the application of fuzzy sets, which is a mathematical organization tool used to determine membership and priority (Ghazinoory et al., 2007), assigning positive or negative values and/or weights to determine relationships (Vaněk et al., 2014), and a multitude of other methods, including force field analysis, the balanced scorecard, gap analysis, synergy analysis,

multi-objective linear programming, and agent-based social simulations, among others (Helms & Nixon, 2010).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) explained that while the SWOT and other prescriptive methods seem simple in that the process is laid out step-by-step, the process can become tedious, cumbersome, and confusing for leaders to manage without expert help. In the business arena, this need manifested itself through the development of whole departments whose sole purpose was to facilitate the strategic planning process for the company. Thus, the bulk of the work of strategic planning shifted to expert planners far removed from the actual work of the company (Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Like CEOs of corporations, superintendents also are faced with managing the strategic planning process, but with fewer resources and potentially less expertise. Most school district superintendents do not have the discretionary funds to hire a staff to conduct strategic planning and also are not well versed in the nuances of the process, yet they are tasked with finding effective methods for conducting strategic planning (Espinosa, 2009; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; W. G. Hambright, 1999).

The planning school. Mintzberg et al. (1998) characterized the planning school as building from the work of the design school by adding concrete organizational goals and objectives to the strategic planning process. Igor Ansoff is characterized in the literature as the father of strategic planning (Martinet, 2010; Moussetis, 2011) and Mintzberg et al. (1998) places Ansoff's work in the planning school. Ansoff's original planning process, developed in the mid-1960s, began with high-level decisions and included a series of steps for solving the problem over and over again. However, with each iteration, more precise results were intended, according to Ansoff (1965), to promote the development of a workable strategy focused on specific goals (Martinet, 2010; Mintzberg, 1994b). Ansoff (1988) agreed with Mintzberg that

early models of strategic planning had too many steps and took too long to be effective in a fast-changing environment. Nonetheless, Ansoff (1988) maintained that deliberate strategies are necessary to reach long-term performance targets, and these strategies are best derived through a formal process grounded in a solid framework (Martinet, 2010; Mintzberg, 1994b).

In the 1990s, Ansoff and Sullivan (1993) recognized that the environment in which corporations operated no longer allowed for the amount of time required to develop strategy utilizing the model developed in the 1960s. This realization led to modifications and new tools, specifically, the contingent strategic success formula (CSSF). CSSF offers the following three constructs or lenses through which to view the state of the organization: (a) environmental turbulence, (b) strategic aggressiveness, and (c) responsiveness of general management capability (Ansoff & Sullivan, 1993).

The premise of the CSSF model is that the profitability of an organization is "optimized when its strategic behavior is aligned with its environment" (Ansoff & Sullivan, 1993, p. 1). The culmination of the CSSF model requires matching all three variables to determine the current state of the organization. Since this model was developed for business, the optimized outcome is typically the organization's level of profitability—in many cases, a predictor of long-term viability (Ansoff & Sullivan, 1993). In the educational arena, a superintendent could use a variation of this model to analyze the relationship between the school district, the community, and the school board to develop the aligned goals and subsequent strategies that would provide for sustained success (Russell, 2014; Villerot, 2014; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

The positioning school. Strategic planning in the positioning school is characterized by providing a selection of time-tested generic strategies in business that are chosen based on the outcome of the analyses described in the design and planning schools (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) categorized Michael Porter's 1980 model of competitive analysis, often referred to as the *five forces model*, in the positioning school. The five forces model necessitates viewing the environment and strategic positioning of an organization through the lenses of the different forces with which the firm must contend (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Prasad, 2011). Based on the intensity of the forces, a company chooses from three strategies: (a) cost leadership, which entails becoming the low-cost producer; (b) differentiation through development or discovery of new products or markets; or (c) focus, which means to narrow the customer groups, product lines, or geographic markets (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Porter (1980) postulated that companies must make a committed choice between strategies that were time-tested versus venturing into the waters of untried strategies. For the positioning school model to be truly effective in education, the forces categories may need to be aligned to those forces present in educational organizations, such as federal, state, and local government, formal and informal political structures, competing private and charter schools, etc. Regardless of the process, the superintendent must still make decisions about the types of strategies that are employed (Chang, 2006; Fullan, 2001).

Prescriptive Models in Education

The bulk of the strategic planning literature in education falls in line with the prescriptive models that Mintzberg described; however, strategic planning is typically described in the education literature as linear or cyclical (Chang, 2006; Cook, 2001; Lane et al., 2005). The bulk of the current body of strategy-focused research for educational leadership is limited to the pragmatic how-to of the process with few researchers presenting conceptual frameworks or guidance that leaders may use to develop processes that meet the unique needs of their situations (Dimmock & Walker, 2004; Eacott, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004).

For this discussion, three specific studies yielding models of strategic planning in education are examined.

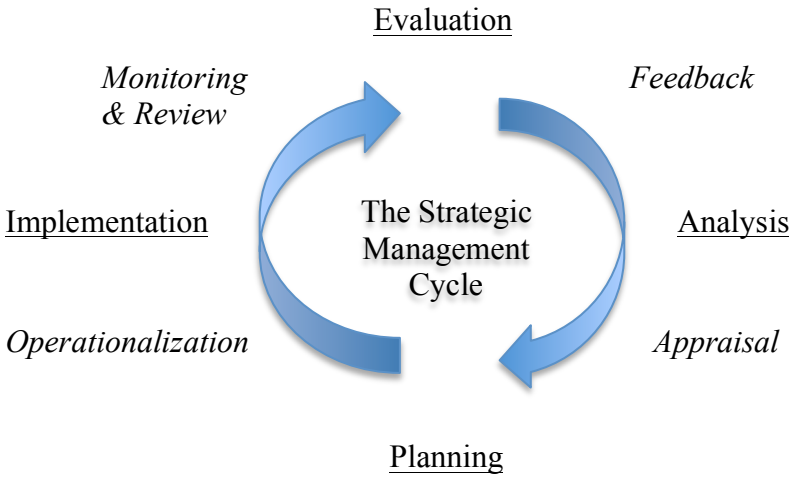
The strategic planning models that educational researchers Cook (2001), Lane et al. (2005), and Chang (2006) promoted are in line with the prescriptive schools that Mintzberg et al. (1998) described as more concerned with the process of strategy making than the actual strategy. Specifically, these two models provide step-by-step instructions like the planning school and espouse variations of the Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) model of the design school (Mintzberg et al., 1998). Lane et al. (2005) postulated that strategic planning requires a specific sequence of activities in order to be effective. Lane et al. offered a 19 step linear process that begins with planning, involves a SWOT analysis and goals-setting, and culminates with a printed version that is subsequently approved by the superintendent and board of trustees.

Through study of strategic planning in schools, Cook (2001) laid out a linear process for strategic planning in education. Cook dubbed the process as "The Planning Discipline." Cook organized the process into steps that also involve a SWOT analysis and goal-setting, but emphasized the importance of beginning with determining the organization's beliefs. Cook explained that the statement of beliefs is the critical first step in strategic planning because it is "a formal expression of the organization's fundamental values: its ethical code, its overriding convictions, its inviolate moral commitments" (p. 57).

Cook (2001) contended that The Planning Discipline provides a specific context for strategic planning that is easy to understand and follow because it uses simple terms that anyone can understand and is arranged in a logical order. Lane et al. (2005) agreed with Cook that the strategic planning terminology should be clearly defined for all parties and thus, their model

provides the intricate details that a superintendent might need in order to conduct a successful strategic planning process.

Chang (2006) studied the concepts and steps in strategic planning in education. Chang concluded that education boasts no singularly superior method for strategic planning and offered a cycle of four basic stages involving analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Each organization determines the activities of best fit in each of the stages of the strategic management cycle seen in Figure 2. Chang's (2006) model is also reminiscent of the prescriptive models that Mintzberg et al. (1998) discussed because it prescribes a specific process that include elements



of the SWOT model as described in the design school.

Figure 2. Chang's (2006) strategic management cycle.

Descriptive Models in Business

Descriptive is a categorical term used in the business literature to describe ways of thinking about strategic planning and strategy formation that do not prescribe a specific process (Mintzberg, 1994b; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Mintzberg et al. (1998) organized the remaining seven schools into this category to delineate how leaders can and do act on emergent strategies or

strategies that form outside of formal processes. The schools in the descriptive category seek to provide context and legitimacy to the argument that while structured strategic planning is important, effective strategies do not always emerge through a neat and tidy process (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

Eacott (2008a, 2008b) studied strategic planning in education and agreed with Mintzberg et al. (1998) that strategic planning and the process of strategy formation should not be confined to a step-by-step process. Eacott (2008a) provided a review of the educational literature regarding strategic planning in education. Eacott (2008b) argued that while the literature on educational strategic planning reveals consistent features, the process should not be defined as linear, but as relational. Strategic planning "is iterative and movement can occur within any feature of the process at any time" (Eacott, 2008b, p. 360). An examination of Mintzberg et al.'s (1998) descriptive schools of strategy formation may inform the context and thought processes that superintendents should take into consideration when implementing strategic planning.

In this section, I will provide a brief synopsis of the seven descriptive schools of strategy formation and their relationship to how superintendents might use these thought processes and concepts to implement strategic planning. Then, I will discuss Eacott's (2008b) relational model of strategic planning and how the descriptive schools of thought are reflected in this model.

The entrepreneurial school. The entrepreneurial school at its core is about the vision of the leader and the mental processes of intuition, judgment, wisdom, experience, and insight (Mintzberg et al., 1998). Joseph Schumpeter (1942), heralded as a lead thinker and scholar in the area of entrepreneurial strategy, developed the notion of creative destruction, or the process of innovation where a revolutionary process, product, or service destroys the old one (Backhaus &

Schumpeter, 2003; McCraw, 2007; Michaelides & Kardasi, 2010; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Backhaus and Schumpeter (2003) explained economic development over time as a product of entrepreneurs employing existing resources in different ways by exploiting new possibilities. A key difference between a manager and an entrepreneur is that the manager focuses on routine while the entrepreneur focuses on change (Michaelides & Kardasi, 2010).

The premise of the entrepreneurial school of strategy formation involves strategy-making as focused on new opportunities, centralized in the mind and hands of the chief executive, characterized by moving forward in the face of uncertainty, and attuned to growth as the central goal (Mintzberg et al., 1998). While the superintendent of a school district may not seek to destroy the competition as Schumpeter (1942) suggests, the thought processes espoused by the entrepreneurial school may assist a superintendent in developing strategies that provide a competitive edge in the current market-based educational environment (Brennan, 2005; Knowles, 2013).

The cognitive school. The cognitive school is concerned with how leaders organize information and seeks to peer into the mind of the strategist to determine how thinking and strategy formation are linked (Chaffee, 1985; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Mintzberg et al. (1998) encapsulated the discussion of the cognitive school using the lenses of bias, information processing, concept mapping, and constructing meaning. Biases can influence strategy-making when a strategist looks for evidence that supports a belief, validates a pattern, creates a correlation, and ignores discrepancies. Biases can lead to a reliance on estimations, intuition, or heuristics that produce both successes and errors in judgment (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Information processing refers to the often filtered and aggregated format in which upper management receives the information from which decisions are made and strategies are potentially formed (Corner, Kinicki, & Keats, 1994; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Strategic formation is affected by the level and nature of the filters applied during organizational information processing (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Leaders of organizations create concept or mental maps from their own schema to identify the factors important to the organization and to display relationships among those factors (Mintzberg et al., 1998). These maps help leaders organize new information efficiently into recognizable chunks that allow for calculated, but rapid, responses to new information (Huff, 1990; Simon, 1987). The availability of mental models in the minds of leaders may enable data collected over time to collide into strategies, seemingly spontaneously. These collisions represent insightful moments that may be unexplainable from a rational lens but are often referred to as *creative synthesis* (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Simon, 1987).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) rounded out a discussion of the cognitive school by describing how strategic leaders use internal and external information to construct meaning and communicate a strategic message. Strategists use this model to "convey meanings that are intended to motivate stakeholders in ways that favor the organization" (Chaffee, 1985, p. 3). In this process, the organization seeks to increase its credibility by changing attitudes toward organizational outputs instead of changing organizational outputs (Chaffee, 1985; Mintzberg et al., 1998). For example, the opening of a new urban-style restaurant in a rural community is met with speculation. Instead of changing the menu, the restaurant engages the community through volunteer efforts and coupons that encourage residents to come to the restaurant. This restaurant

is constructing an image of itself as part of the community both symbolically and structurally (Chaffee, 1985).

The information organizing methods that Mintzberg et al. (1998) described in the cognitive school could prove useful to a superintendent who is gathering and processing information from a variety of sources about a myriad of systems and structures. A superintendent who understands how filtering and bias impact information and has the ability to develop mental models to organize knowledge may be able to use this to construct effective strategies both within and outside of formal strategic planning processes (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

The learning school. Mintzberg et al. (1998) described strategy formation in the learning school as conceptually emergent because it "opens the door to strategic learning" by acknowledging the validity of the "organization's capacity to experiment" (p. 189). Mintzberg et al. (1998) promoted Quinn's (1980) theory of logical incrementalism as the beginning of the learning school. Quinn viewed the strategic management of an organization as a series of subsystems in which decisions are made with patterns that bear some level of consistency. These patterns are guided by the top level of executives through planned learning opportunities in an effort to move the people in the organization incrementally toward a broadly conceived organizational goal. Consequently, the organization learns as it engages in the strategy formation process (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Quinn, 1980).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) described the role of leadership in the learning school as one where leaders cultivate an environment enabling new strategies to emerge, to be recognized, and to be capitalized on. A superintendent might use this learning-oriented method of strategy formation by introducing specific learning in one layer or part of the organization, such as

campus administrators or a group of campuses. From this learning, campus leaders and campuses might collaborate to develop and test strategies that impact their schools. Successes can lead to a groundswell of enthusiasm for the strategies and potentially, more widespread implementation. As Mintzberg et al. (1998) explained "informed individuals anywhere in an organization can contribute to the strategy process" (p. 178) and these emergent strategies can lead to directional shifts within the organization (Quinn, 1980).

While hailing the learning school as a move in the right direction from the rigidness of the prescriptive schools, Mintzberg et al. cautioned against allowing a complete lack of structure. When assessing the needs and desired outcomes of the organization "coherence may be critical for performance. In other words, what matters in these organizations is not just learning, but collective learning" (Mintzberg et al., 1998, p. 226).

The practice of collaborating in a learning environment for collective growth and development is considered a best practice in education (DuFour, 2007; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). In their study of valuable practices for superintendents, Hilliard and Newsome (2013) concluded that the superintendent has a responsibility to provide opportunities for stakeholders to participate in collective learning and a collaborative dialogue to develop strategies to improve student learning. The conversation and learning, whether formal or informal, must be anchored in a clearly articulated and shared vision and mission (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013).

The notion that superintendents are expected to lead learning throughout their school district is not new, but may not be readily connected to the strategic planning process (Callahan, 1966; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2001; Kowalski, 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Nonetheless, the thought processes and actions espoused by the learning school may support a superintendent's efforts to move strategic plans from paper to action.

The power school. Power and politics are subtly implied by Mintzberg et al. (1998) as part of the learning school of strategy formation; however, power and politics become overt in the power school. Mintzberg et al. argued that the nature of power and politics falls into one of two camps: (a) the micro camp, which is concerned with the power and politics *found within* the organization, and (b) the macro camp, which is concerned with the power and politics *used by* the organization. The micro camp is focused "on internal actors conflicting with their colleagues, usually out of self-interest," and the macro camp involves observing the organization as it acts in "its own self-interest, in conflict, or in cooperation with other organizations" (Mintzberg et al., 1998, p. 235).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) stated that the micro camp of the power school recognizes that organizations are made "of individuals with dreams, hopes, jealousies, interests, and fears" (p. 236). Nonetheless, Guth and Macmillan (1986) lamented that many approaches to strategy development ignore the need to secure the organization's commitment to the strategy. Without commitment, middle-level managers can lack shared goals and perceptions causing difficulty with implementing the strategy. The lack of commitment manifests either as passive compliance or active intervention (Guth & MacMillan, 1986).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) described strategy formation from the macro power perspective as one consisting "first of managing the demands of these [external] actors and second of selectively making use of these actors for the organization's benefit" (p. 248). In their study of the external control of organizations, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) found only 10% of the variance in performance of an organization depends on leaders' actions and the context or environment accounts for the rest (Astley & Fombrun, 1983; Dill, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). For this reason, Pfeffer and Salancik recommended that companies devote adequate amounts of resources

to gather reliable information from the environment that can inform planning and decision-making.

School district superintendents must navigate external political systems, such as city, state, and federal governments, and community organizations as well as internal relations with the school board, teacher organizations, and employees (Callahan, 1966; Hunter, 1997; Kowalski, McCord, Peters, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Merok Paulsen, Johansson, Moos, Nihlfors, & Risku, 2014; Tekniepe, 2015). The concepts and lessons of Mintzberg's power school as manifested in business organizations are aligned with the nature of most organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Therefore, superintendents must maintain awareness of these tenets of micro and macro power and political positions in the school district as they lead the strategic planning process (Ikemoto, Taliaferro, Fenton, & Davis, 2014; Merok Paulsen et al., 2014; Tekniepe, 2015).

The cultural school. Culture is discussed in the strategic management literature as a force that impacts an organization's decision-making style (Prahalad & Bettis, 1986; Wright, 1979), resistance to strategic change (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1994; Bettis & Prahalad, 1995; Weick, 2015), and the ability to overcome culture in order to make strategic changes (Björkman, 1989; Lorsch, 1986). In addition, an organization's dominant values and culture alignment may determine the degree to which a particular strategy is successful (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Peters & Waterman, 1984).

In their study of the interplay between culture and strategy formation, Rindova, Dalpiaz, and Ravasi (2010) highlighted that an organization's culture and identity are interrelated. As a result, leaders must introduce new self-definitions in conjunction with shifting strategies to change organizational culture and ensure the learning school intersects with the cultural school.

Introducing new learning can influence new skill or idea development and a shift in organizational identity that subsequently impacts culture (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Rindova et al., 2010).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) stressed that culture can more often discourage necessary change in established organizations due to its often deep-rooted systems, traditions, and sense of purpose. Mintzberg et al. quoted Karl Weick (1995), who said, "a corporation doesn't *have* a culture. A corporation *is* a culture. That is why they're so horribly difficult to change" (p. 270). The education literature indicates that superintendent leadership activities are influenced by the culture of the district and that superintendent actions can also influence the culture of the district (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Tekniepe, 2015). Leaders, such as superintendents, therefore, should consider the impact of culture on strategy formation throughout the chosen strategic process (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

The environmental school. Mintzberg et al. (1998) described the environmental school as a lens of strategy formation concerned with the leader's role in responding to the changing environmental forces applying pressure to the organization. Leaders must factor the interplay between environment, internal structures, and organization members into the development of strategy (Buckley, Harvey, Novicevic, & Halbesleben, 2006; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Wei & Yeh-Yun Lin, 2015). The force of *structural inertia*, an internal force, can impact an organization's openness to change and is defined as the "basic structures and character of an organization fixed shortly after birth" (Mintzberg et al., 1998, p. 291). Buckley et al. (2006) contended that leaders who create a culture where members continue to learn and grow can mitigate the effects of structural inertia by establishing adaptability with the environmental pressures.

In their study of leadership, organizations, and their environment, Buckley et al. (2006) explained that organizational leaders and members must "optimize an organization for fitness within a given environment" (p. 65). Leadership is important but is only as effective as the match between the leader, the organization, and the environment. External and internal factors can diminish the influence and direct impact of the leader (Buckley et al., 2006).

The environmental school provides valuable insight to a superintendent considering beginning a strategic planning process because the literature indicates that a school district's readiness to take on the process plays a part in its success or failure (Espinosa, 2009; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). The superintendent is responsible for gauging the environmental conditions and managing a school district's readiness to engage in any kind of change process, including strategic planning. A lack of readiness can produce an ineffective plan and frustrated participants (Espinosa, 2009; Fullan, 2001; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004).

The configuration school. Mintzberg et al. (1998) introduced the configuration school as a place of convergence for all the other schools of strategy formation. For the superintendent, the configuration school, as a culmination of the prescriptive and descriptive schools, provides a potential framework to help align the multiple roles and responsibilities encompassed in the functioning of their school district with the strategic planning process that best meets their needs. Each school of strategy formation has something to offer to the process, and the configuration school combines several schools into a comprehensive framework (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

The two main components of the configuration school, according to Mintzberg et al. (1998), are configuration, or the organization and its context, and transformation, or the strategy-making process. They explained that most organizations, according to the configuration school,

maintain a stable arrangement of coherent characteristics and behaviors that are representative of a particular context over time. Within that period, the behaviors of the organization and the strategies that are developed and utilized appear to align with the environmental context. When periods of stability are interrupted, transformation can take place as the organization generates "a quantum leap to another configuration" (Mintzberg et al., 1998, p. 305).

Mintzberg et al. (1998) proposed that successive states of configuration stability followed by periods of transformation describe the life cycle of an organization. Therefore, the key to strategic leadership is to "sustain stability, or at least adaptable strategic change, most of the time but periodically to recognize the need for transformation and be able to manage that disruptive process without destroying the organization" (Mintzberg et al., 1998, p. 305).

Ultimately, the leader must determine which conceptual design and process for strategy making is most appropriate for the organization's context in a given period. The view of the configuration school is that both prescriptive and descriptive strategy formation processes can be effective depending on the state of the organization (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Rialp-Criado, Galván-Sánchez, & Suárez-Ortega, 2010). Mintzberg et al.'s (1998) analysis of the methodology in which strategic planning is carried out in an organization as the responsibility of the leader gives credence to the need to study how superintendents navigate this decision and the ultimate implementation. In the next section, Eacott's (2008b) strategic planning model lends itself to the incorporation of concepts and thought processes described in Mintzberg's descriptive schools of strategy formation.

Descriptive Models in Education

The closest comparable model to Mintzberg's descriptive schools in education is Eacott's (2008b) relational model which espouses interrelated dimensions that are more flexible than

those in the prescriptive category. While the model does include specific steps, Eacott described the framework as one that reflected a relational process aligning with the dynamic roles in which educational leaders engage. Just as Mintzberg et al. (1998) argued for a flexible approach to planning and emergent strategy development in business, Eacott (2008b) explained that applying the same flexibility to education enables movement to "occur within any feature of the process at any time" (p. 360).

The relational process of strategy. Eacott's (2008b) relational model resembles a matrix with its five inter-related dimensions of *envisioning, engaging, articulating, implementing,* and *monitoring* that interconnect with each other and surround *strategy in education* as depicted in Figure 2. Eacott maintained that the relational framework is not about strategic management or strategic leadership. The relational framework places the superintendent into the role of *educational strategist* through which "leadership behaviors and management processes are targeted toward the enhancements of the school's educational programs and most importantly student development" (Eacott, 2008b, p. 363). The superintendent's origin of information is less important than demonstrating consistency and alignment with the purpose and core values of the organization in order to influence student achievement and strategic planning success (Eacott, 2008b). Eacott (2008b) is suggesting, as Mintzberg et al. (1998) has, that strategy formation can originate both inside and outside of a formal planning process but must still be aligned with the purpose and goals of the organization.

Eacott's (2008b) framework requires the superintendent to determine when and how to move through the five stages, as seen in Figure 3. As the chief navigator, a superintendent must be aware of all the factors that impact an organization, strategic planning, and strategy formation

in order to ensure that the process leads to better organizational performance (Eacott, 2008b; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

Figure 3. Eacott's (2008b) relational process of strategy in education.

Summary for Models

The literature around strategic planning in both business and education indicates that strategic planning is designed generally as the processes by which leaders develop strategies to respond to changing environments (Ansoff, 1988; Chaffee, 1985; Chang, 2006; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). Mintzberg et al. (1998) provided 10 schools of strategy formation as a framework for discussing the multiple theories on strategic planning in business. Elements of the strategic planning models in business also are found in education (Chang, 2006; Cook, 2001; Eacott, 2008b; Lane et al., 2005). Mintzberg et al. (1998) cautioned leaders to pay attention to

the whole strategy formation process and not to rely on one process or way of thinking as the only possible solution.

In their study of strategic planning and the growth of a business, Titus, Covin, and Slevin (2011) found that effective strategy formation involves both planned strategic planning processes and emergent strategy formation. Leaders must determine at what point on the continuum, between highly structured and completely flexible and adaptable, the best fit for the needs of the organization is found. These findings concur with Mintzberg et al.'s (1998) argument that no one right way exists for developing strategies and conducting strategic planning within an organization.

These insights also can be applied to strategic planning theories and practices in K–12 educational leadership. Superintendents must make the key decisions informed by the literature to effectively carry out the strategic planning process (Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2008b, 2010; Fullan, 2001). Next, I will examine the benefits and challenges of strategic planning to make the case that this is an important endeavor in which superintendents and school district leadership should engage.

Benefits and Challenges of Strategic Planning

The literature indicates a variety of benefits that accrue for both business and educational organizations through the use of strategic planning. However, there also are many challenges associated with strategic planning. In this section, I will discuss the benefits and challenges of strategic planning as described in the literature with an emphasis on education.

Benefits of Strategic Planning

The literature indicates that the benefits of strategic planning in both business and education include providing leadership with a clear and vetted roadmap toward desired goals while

presenting an image of organization and purpose to customers and the community (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Ebner, 2012; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Steiner, 1979). In addition, strategic planning in education has been linked to superintendent longevity and school district stability, which has a positive impact on student achievement (Ikemoto et al., 2014; Russell, 2014; Villerot, 2014; Waters & Marzano, 2007). While the business literature generally suggests that strategic planning activities have a positive impact on corporate performance (Ebner, 2012; Steiner, 1979), in this discussion, I will focus specifically on the benefits of strategic planning in education.

In their study of school district leadership that works, Waters and Marzano (2007) found that superintendents who engaged in leadership activities that included collaborative goal-setting, setting non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, seeking board of trustee alignment and support for the goals, monitoring the goals, and allocating resources toward the goals had a positive effect on student achievement. While the study does not mention strategic planning by name, the activities described are all mentioned in the literature surrounding strategic planning (Chang, 2006; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005; Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Superintendent tenure has been linked to school district stability, which also has a positive impact on student achievement (Ikemoto et al., 2014; Villerot, 2014; Yee & Cuban, 1996). Villerot (2014) studied superintendent entry plans and found that building a recursive and systemic strategic planning process was a critical next step for superintendents that they perceived contributed to their longevity in the district. Because the study "involved participants with five or more years of experience," Villerot determined "this continual, systemic, strategic process was…a factor in long-term organizational stability" (p. 94).

Based on study of the definitions, benefits, and barriers to strategic planning, G. Hambright and Diamantes (2004) found that strategic planning enabled district leadership to engage stakeholders in a collaborative dialogue. As a result, members of the organization and community contributed to the shared decision-making process and were more likely to support district initiatives (G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). Additionally, Bolman and Deal (2008) explained that plans can be used as symbols, excuses for interactions, and advertisements. The symbolic benefits of strategic planning may support the need for school districts to be attractive and competitive in the movement to a more choice-driven environment (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Eacott, 2008b).

Following an analysis of the education literature, Lane et al. (2005) summarized the benefits of strategic planning as providing leaders with an avenue to establish the vision, mission, beliefs, and goals of the school district and work toward accomplishing them in collaboration with all stakeholders. The development and communication of this plan provides a clear roadmap that school districts can use to guide the organization and present a perception of clear vision and direction to the community (Bolman & Deal, 2008; W. G. Hambright, 1999; Lane et al., 2005).

Challenges of Strategic Planning

The purported benefits of strategic planning are counterbalanced with challenges in both business and the K–12 education arena. G. Hambright and Diamantes (2004) uncovered multiple barriers to strategic planning in the education literature that included inadequate funding, varying levels of commitment and expertise among leadership and participants, lack of monitoring and implementation of the plans, waning participation in the process over time, bureaucratic inflexibility, and lack of buy-in for the process and/or the need for change. An

emphasis on the process and production of a well-organized plan that ended up collecting duct on a shelf was identified as a challenge in both business and educational strategic planning (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Eacott, 2008b; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). In addition, traditional strategic planning processes often move much more slowly than the speed at which environments change (Ansoff & Sullivan, 1993; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999; Roth, 2015).

As described in the review of the various models and schools of thought around strategic planning, the process may require more readiness, expertise, and resources than what an organization can access (Espinosa, 2009; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Espinosa (2009) studied superintendents' perceptions of strategic planning and found that superintendents valued strategic planning. However, Espinosa's superintendents did not feel equipped to facilitate and manage the process, especially the involvement of community members. In addition, Espinosa discovered that superintendents were not always able to move forward with the demands of strategic planning due to their district's lack of readiness or fitness. A district's lack of fitness can lead to a poor-quality plan, ineffective implementation, and frustration for the participants (Espinosa, 2009; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). The strategic planning in education literature presents gaps in understanding that are explicated in the following section.

Gaps in the Literature

In education, a narrowly focused literature about strategic planning exists. Indeed, few have studied how superintendents actually implement strategic planning and link the process to actions. This section summarizes a few key aspects of strategic planning in education. It is important to understand how superintendents conduct strategic planning activities considering

their multiple roles and responsibilities, government mandates for continuous improvement and accountability, and the shift toward a market-driven environment in education.

In this section, how strategic planning interfaces with the multiple roles of the superintendent and a few key environmental pressures every superintendent faces are discussed. As I summarize the multiple roles of the superintendent, I will discuss how governmental regulations for continuous improvement planning, the environmental pressures related to school choice, and the movement toward privatization might impact strategic planning. Through this discussion I will make the case for my study of how superintendents conduct strategic planning and link the planning to action.

The Superintendent as a Strategic Leader

The strategic planning literature suggests that the superintendent has a significant role in guiding a school district's successful fulfillment of a strategic plan and provides various models for strategic planning (Chang, 2006; Cook, 2001; Eacott, 2008b; Lane et al., 2005), but little research is available on how superintendents navigate the process, nor are field guide examples available to guide superintendents and their teams through the process (Eacott, 2010; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). Cook (2001) described educational leaders who engage in strategic planning as *futurists* who have clarity of purpose and concentrate efforts toward that purpose while inspiring others to follow.

The literature delineates multiple roles and responsibilities entrusted to the superintendent, of which strategic leader is implied (Callahan, 1966; Eacott, 2008b; Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski et al., 2011; Olivarez, 2013). In studies of the role of the superintendent, Callahan (1966), Kowalski (2005), and Olivarez (2013) created frameworks regarding varied responsibilities required to effectively lead a school district. Callahan (1966) conceptualized the

evolution of the four distinct roles of the superintendent from 1865 to the present. These roles are (a) the superintendent as teacher of teachers, (b) the superintendent as business manager, (c) the superintendent as statesman, and (d) the superintendent as applied social scientist. Kowalski (2005) agreed that Callahan's roles had stood the test of time and added the role of communicator as critical for the modern superintendent.

Olivarez (2013) further delineated the responsibilities of a superintendent as enabling a school district to fulfill 10 critical functions:

> (1) governance operations; (2) curriculum and instruction; (3) elementary and secondary campus operations; (4) instructional support services; (5) human resources; (6) administrative, finance, and business operations; (7) facilities planning and plant services; (8) accountability, information management, and technology services; (9) external and internal communications; and (10) operational support systems–safety and security, food services, and transportation (p. 12).

This delineation, along with Callahan's four roles and Kowalski's addition, provides a lens through which the role of the superintendent as a strategic leader can be viewed.

The Superintendent as Teacher of Teachers

The literature bears out that the superintendent as an instructional leader is still a valid and important role made more complex in the modern era and requiring planning, strategizing, and monitoring in a collaborative environment (Kowalski et al., 2011; Lewthwaite, 2006; Olivarez, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Building and maintaining a culture of learning, as discussed in Mintzberg's learning, cultural, and environmental schools of strategy formation, indicate that a superintendent might use the role of lead learner in the implementation of a strategic planning process (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

The Superintendent as a Business Leader

The role of the superintendent as a business manager aligns with strategic philosophies in both the prescriptive and descriptive sides of strategic planning in the business literature (Callahan, 1966; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Superintendents must pay attention to the fiscal pressures of scare resources and increasing demands espoused by Mintzberg et al.'s (1998) planning school while also building human capacity as suggested in the environmental and learning schools.

Bolman and Deal (2008) advised that leaders must develop a comprehensive and shared philosophy and strategies for managing and developing people within the organization. This shared philosophy must include the recruitment and hiring of the right people; retention, development, and empowerment strategies; and promotion of diversity. Superintendents seeking to be competitive with neighboring schools and districts must be strategic when considering compensation, benefits, training, and other factors that contribute to employee recruitment and retention (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The Superintendent as a Statesman

Politics and policy-making are discussed throughout the strategic planning literature, and the conceptualization of the superintendent as a statesman implies an overt role in the politics and policy-making of education. While politics certainly affect all areas of an organization, a superintendent's understanding of governance operations and the ability to respond appropriately in a changing educational landscape is key to the effectiveness of a superintendent (Kowalski et al., 2011; Olivarez, 2013).

Texas and United States laws do not require school districts to engage in strategic planning but do require that they conduct a collaborative planning process aimed at improving

student achievement. These laws list specific requirements for the content of the plans and the representative makeup of the committees which superintendents must consult in the creation of strategic plans (Texas Education Code, 2009; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002). The education literature indicates that this required improvement planning is often referred to as strategic planning, but is far too limited in scope to truly be defined as strategic (Cook, 2001; Eacott, 2008b; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004). Where the literature could be of assistance is in providing examples of how superintendents incorporate the required improvement planning into a strategic planning process (Cook, 2001; Espinosa, 2009; W. G. Hambright, 1999).

The literature suggests that the political acumen of the educational leader, such as building relationships with the school board, community, and legislative bodies, is critical to the tenure of a superintendent (Kowalski, 2005; Russell, 2104). Strategic planning has been identified as a method by which superintendents can present a clear vision, mission, and plan of action that is in alignment with the internal and external politics of an organization, but little research has been conducted to help a superintendent understand how to do this (Eacott, 2010; Espinosa, 2009; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004).

The Superintendent as a Social Scientist

The concept of the superintendent as a social scientist embodies the idea that the leader of a school district should operate with a decision-making framework that is grounded in researched best practices (Callahan, 1966). Strategic planning processes, both formal and informal, support the idea that the superintendent leads a learning organization with the capacity to experiment based on information gathered both internally and externally (Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2010; Fullan, 2001; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). Kowalski (2011) described the role of superintendents as leaders who "are expected to lead by relying on professional knowledge to

make school-improvement recommendations, but they are expected to do so while remaining subservient to the will of the people" (p. 1).

As a social scientist, a superintendent must apply the concepts and theories of human and organizational behavior in order to best determine how to navigate the internal and external nuances that make up the context of the school district (Callahan, 1966). Callahan (1966) described the superintendent as someone "who understood human beings and organizations and would use this understanding to keep the organization running effectively" (p. 219). This implies a need to understand the politics, knowledge, skills, and culture of the organization as described in both the prescriptive and descriptive models of strategy formation (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

The Superintendent as a Communicator

As discussed earlier in this chapter, a strategic plan can help a superintendent communicate a clear vision, mission, and plan of action for the work of the school district (Bolman & Deal, 2008; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005). Strategic planning provides a means for dialogue between superintendents and their school districts' diverse stakeholders as they seek to influence or guide "the strategic direction of the whole system" (Espinosa, 2009, p. 203). The strategic plan can serve as an anchor of sorts that aligns the work of the district to the common goals and beliefs established through a collaborative process (Cook, 2001).

In the world of school choice, districts must compete in the arena of public opinion and a strategic plan with a clear message supports a positive image (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2001). Strategic planning provides the superintendent with a method to organize and prioritize the work of the school district and communicate a clear vision and

mission to the community (Cook, 2001; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Lane et al., 2005). This symbolism of this work supports the impression that the school district is moving forward in a positive way (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Still, it is incumbent upon the superintendent to manage the process and develop strategies that are effective and aligned with the collective needs, desires, and culture of the community (Chang, 2006; Fullan, 2001).

Through the strategic planning process, whether formal or informal, superintendents can share and collect information that can guide decision-making (Eacott, 2010; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). As Mintzberg et al. (1998) suggested, strategies can form through both planned and unplanned processes. The key is that the leader is aware of the multiple ways to give and receive information and knows what to do with that information to benefit the organization (Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). A study of how superintendents manage the process and communication through formal strategic planning processes and emergent situations would add to the body of educational strategic planning research.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Procedures

This basic qualitative research study examined how school district leaders use strategic planning to make decisions and take action in a changing educational landscape. Specifically, this study explored how superintendents who have 5 or more years of experience and self-identify as having conducted strategic planning conceptualized the key components of strategic planning and managed the process through actionable decision-making and goals. This chapter includes the methodology and procedures used in this study. The research questions, research design and analytical paradigm, sources of data, and procedures are included first. The discussions of the data analysis and strategies to promote validity, trustworthiness, and reliability complete the chapter.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do superintendents who engage in strategic planning identify as key components to strategic planning implementation?
2. How do superintendents who engage in strategic planning mange the formal and informal processes?
3. What role do other factors, such as politics, environment, superintendent experience, systems, and structures, have on the strategic planning and strategy formation process?
4. How do superintendents who engage in strategic planning link the strategic planning process to implement action and change throughout the district?

Research Design

This study was conducted with a qualitative research design. The qualitative design choice allows for understanding how superintendents make sense of their professional experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore how superintendents identified and conceptualized key components of strategic planning, how they used these components to manage the formal and informal processes of strategy formation, and subsequently linked the strategic planning to the implementation of action and change in the district. Strategy formation is the moment in either a structured process or emergent situation where a strategy is designed (Mintzberg et al., 1998). A qualitative study allowed for an in-depth discovery and personalized view of each superintendent's experience with strategic planning. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a basic qualitative study allows the researcher to learn "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). In support of the qualitative design, next is a discussion of the analytical paradigm.

The analytical paradigm for this study was that of the constructivist/interpretivist frame. The constructivist/interpretivist frame assumes multiple interpretations of a single event may exist and reality is socially constructed based on people's interactions with each other and the environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2009) explained that the goal of constructivist/interpretivist research is "to rely as much as possible on the participant's views of the situation being studied" (p. 8). The constructivist/interpretivist researcher seeks to make sense of and explore patterns of meaning in the experience of others through the study of the participant's context and personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016). The constructivist/interpretivist paradigm allowed for an in-depth discovery of the experiences and perspectives of superintendents who have conducted strategic planning.

Sampling and Participants

I interviewed six Texas superintendents for this study. I chose this sample size in order to allow for in-depth interviews and to provide meaningful variation. The participants for this study were superintendents with 5 or more years of experience in that role and who self-identified as having conducted strategic planning. The strategic planning process and the subsequent linking of strategy to action take time. Fullan (2001) identified 5 years as a minimal amount of time for educational reforms to be implemented and produce long-term results. Therefore, this time period seemed a reasonable amount of time to plan, implement, and progress-monitor a strategic plan. In addition, strategic planning has been identified in the literature as a factor in supporting superintendent longevity. Five years is at the top of the average tenure for a superintendent (Villerot, 2014).

I identified the participants through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling involves asking key informants or the participants to refer other potential participants who meet the study criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I began my search by reaching out to fellow educators who had ties to superintendents to find out if they knew anyone who met my criteria. I reviewed websites for the district in which each recommended superintendent worked to verify how long they had served in the role. Next, I contacted those superintendents to confirm that they had conducted a strategic planning process and were willing to participate in my study.

The snowball sampling method is dependent on the people that the researcher knows or can find through referrals. Therefore, the representativeness of the sample is not guaranteed, and the sample may not be a true representation of the population. In addition, due to the familiarity

of the participants and the researcher with the referred participants, they may possess similar traits and characteristics which may not represent the entirety of the population (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; "Snowball Sampling," n.d.). For this study, I reached out to seven male and two female superintendents who were recommended to me. Neither of the female superintendents responded and one male superintendent stated that he had not conducted a strategic planning process.

Snowball sampling is a form of purposive sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described purposive sampling as a method that allows investigators to gain an in-depth understanding of the specific area of study. The use of a purposive sampling strategy, such as snowball sampling, in qualitative research is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 96). The superintendents that I interviewed were able to provide rich descriptions of how they implemented the strategic planning process from first-hand experience. This emic exploration allowed me to gather and organize the information from the perspectives of the superintendents who have led the experience of strategic planning.

Sources of Data

I collected data for this study via semi-structured interviews, field notes, and the collection of artifacts when available. Artifacts collected included copies of strategic plans, action plans, and other supporting documents. The initial interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participant's office or conference room. Follow-up interviews were held over the phone. The semi-structured interviews were "guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions are determined ahead of

time" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). My list consisted of 20 questions guided my initial inquiry (Appendix A). Additional questions were asked in response to the context and information shared by each participant. Since each superintendent worked in a unique environment, this format allowed me to "respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111).

I took field notes to record observations of the physical surroundings as well as the gestures of the respondents that proved significant in the explanation of meaning in the findings. For example, if a respondent threw up his hands, leaned forward, or spoke louder, I noted it on the page next to the question that was just asked. Hays and Singh (2012) explained that "field notes can be recorded in many forms that may include mental notes, jotted notes, or full notes, representing a continuum of less to more detailed note taking" (p. 231). In some cases, I took mental notes and wrote them down after the interview.

Procedures

Institutional Approval

Prior to conducting interviews, I took the appropriate steps to ensure the privacy, welfare, and rights of the participants. I applied for approval to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Texas at Austin. In addition, I contacted all the selected participants and completed necessary paperwork, such as informed consent waivers, prior to conducting research.

Interviews

Upon consent of the University IRB, I solicited interviews from superintendents as part of recruiting study participants. I arranged to facilitate each initial interview in a face-to-face setting. I conducted follow-up interviews via telephone with two superintendents. The purpose

of these follow-up interviews was to get additional and clarifying information related to their experience with strategic planning. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. During each interview, I took physical and mental notes that described the physical surroundings and gestures of the participants. This allowed for a richer description of the context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing and interactive process between myself, the participants, and the data collected. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described qualitative data analysis as occurring simultaneously with data collection because "hunches, working hypotheses, and educated guesses direct the investigator's attention to certain data and then to refining or verifying hunches" (p. 195). In some cases, data collected and analyzed in initial interviews, field notes, and reflective journals informed subsequent interview questions.

I began the data analysis for this study with open coding and analytical or axial coding of the interview transcripts. Open coding involves categorizing and organizing the data based on information potentially relevant to answering the research questions (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I established four a priori codes and 18 sub codes for the data analysis process. Additional codes were added to identify new themes in the data as they emerged. Codes were then grouped into themes or categories as recurring patterns and relationships emerged in the data. This process of grouping is often called axial or analytical coding because it is derived from making meaning of the data in the context of the study's purpose. Categories are typically derived from the viewpoint of the investigator, directly from the words of the participants, or from the literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using these two coding methods, I had the ability to explore the emerging themes in reference to the research questions and within the context of

each participant. As data were coded and organized, I continually noted comparisons and described both differences and similarities across the information provided by the participants.

I used the major themes discovered through the data analysis to create an outline for the narrative data style presented in Chapter 4. The information from each interview was organized to represent the similar themes while also examining the unique perspectives and choices of each of the respondents. In this way, I was able to show connections both within the data collected and to the literature.

Validity, Trustworthiness, and Reliability

I used triangulation of data, respondent validation, an explanation of researcher position, and adequate time collecting data as strategies to confirm validity and promote trustworthiness. Because the purpose of a qualitative research study is to make meaning in the context of the participants' perspectives, confirming internal validity is complex and subjective (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that the subjective nature of qualitative inquiry requires that validity and reliability be addressed through "careful attention to a study's conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented" (p. 238). For this reason, an explanation of how I ensured validity, reliability, and trustworthiness follows.

Triangulation refers to the comparing and cross-checking of interviews, field notes, reflective journals, and any acquired artifacts throughout the data collection and analysis process to confirm the emergent findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I compared data from interviews, artifacts, respondent verifications, and reflective journaling to support and better describe findings (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Respondent validation, or member checking, is defined as soliciting feedback on the research finding from the people interviewed (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of respondent validation is described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have of what is going on" (p. 246). In addition, Merriam and Tisdell explained that getting feedback directly from study participants aids the researcher in uncovering his or her own biases and misunderstandings. I sent each participant the narrative story that was derived from their interview for feedback and verification of meaning. Four of the respondents provided feedback and/or confirmed the presentation of the data. Two made minor adjustments to clarify meaning.

Reliability suggests that a study can be replicated to produce similar results which does not align with the subjective nature of qualitative research (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, reliability in qualitative studies is better defined as consistency and dependability in the data to ensure it makes sense (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, I employed the triangulation of data, respondent validation, researcher awareness and explanation of any bias, and adequate time to gather data to support a valid and trustworthy qualitative study.

The revelation of a researcher's biases, experiences, worldviews, dispositions, and assumptions help the reader to better understand the interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I have served as an executive leader for two school districts and participated in strategic planning efforts. I have also completed graduate coursework in educational leadership at both the masters and doctoral levels. While I have not served as a superintendent, close association with superintendents and graduate study of this leadership role impacted the lens through which I interpreted the data. My experience and associations in the educational

leadership profession provided a level of contextual understanding that someone outside of the field might miss.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included the small sample size, the semi-structured interview process, and the snowball sampling methodology. While the size of the sample was ample to answer the research questions in depth, the number of participants did not represent the entire population of superintendents. In addition, the participants were all men, which limits the study to the male perspective.

The semi-structured interview process allowed for open-ended questioning relevant to the context. Therefore, each participant was not asked the exact same questions. I chose this method to allow for deeper and customized questioning in order to better explore each participant experience and voice in context (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Finally, the choice to identify participants via snowball sampling limited the scope of the study to those known by me, participants, and/or other professional acquaintances. While this method is desirable for this study because it points the researcher to participants most qualified to provide insights into the research questions, it limited the participant population (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Chapter 3 described the methods and procedures used to identify how superintendents conduct strategic planning. This chapter presents the data discovered in the study. This basic qualitative study used a combination of semi-structured interviews, artifact review, and thick, rich descriptions.

The data are presented in story format to illustrate the unique nuances of each superintendent's approach to strategic planning. While the strategic planning process each superintendent used involved similarities, the differences also provide insight into how superintendents conduct the strategic planning process. Pseudonyms for the superintendents, the sites, and artifacts have been used to protect the anonymity of all six participants.

Dane Iker—Piper ISD

Plan on a Page

Dr. Dane Iker has been the superintendent of Piper ISD for more than a year and previously served as superintendent for 8 years in Victory ISD. Piper ISD is a major suburban district in Texas with strong historic roots and diverse and changing demographics. Dr. Iker explained that the district is a mix of old and new.

> We still talk about the founding families…When we go to name a school, there's a committee that's comprised of local folks and the founding families are in there…You've got this real mix of classic tradition, pride, old things that have been here for a while…then you have this new stuff with the suburban and the urban.

The northern part of the district is primarily middle class and wealthy neighborhoods and is adjacent to a relatively rural area. The southern part of the district connects with a major city and is primarily urban and less wealthy. More than 50,000 pre-K through 12th grade students attend school in Piper ISD. The percentage of those who are considered economically

disadvantaged has increased over time along with the percentage of students from minority groups.

> So, in the last several years, what you've seen is that urban section moving up…Some of our schools that have traditionally been very low poverty schools are now a very mixed bag. A school that was at 10% [economically disadvantaged] is now at 50% eco-dis or higher…the largest student population in Piper ISD is Hispanic. Folks don't think of Piper ISD that way, but we're 40% Hispanic, we're 34% White, 14% African American, and 8% Asian American. But what I tell folks all the time is, that's great, it's exciting, because we're looking more and more like the State of Texas.

There is a major highway that runs east and west and divides the northern and southern sections of the district. Part of Dr. Iker's and his team's goal was to unite Piper ISD and make sure everyone had a voice in the future of the district. Having been in the district less than 2 years, he knew that he would have to involve a wide variety of people and engage them in a strategic planning process.

Entry Plan and Board of Trustees

Dr. Iker recognized the value of strategic planning when he took the helm of Piper ISD, but experience told him that he needed to approach the process and the product in a way that it would be shared, meaningful, and useful to the people and the work of the district. He explained that his experience in Victory ISD helped him see the need for a strategic plan because even though they had a plan and a written shared vision, "it really kind of got stuck at the administrative principal level and it didn't penetrate the organization deeply." Although he and Victory ISD's board of trustees had conversations about taking the district through a strategic planning process, the level of angst from the board members caused him to stop the process.

Therefore, in Piper ISD, he needed to make sure that the board and the community were interested in moving forward. Before beginning a strategic planning process, Dr. Iker conducted an entry plan process that he described as essentially a qualitative study of the district and

included face-to-face interviews and a survey. He stressed that getting to know the district and community are vital in determining priorities as a superintendent and whether a strategic planning process is necessary and viable. What he learned was that Piper ISD had a strategic plan, but few people referred to it or even knew it existed, which opened the door to the conversation.

> I did a big survey whenever I entered [Piper ISD] as well and it asked specifically about the strategic plan. People knew about the vision, knew about the mission, knew about this, that, but the strategic plan was the lowest piece. I was like, great, because that's kind of a great thing for a new superintendent to be able to do.

In addition to confirmation from the entry survey that developing a strategic plan was needed, Dr. Iker made sure that his board members were ready and willing to take on the task. Every step of the way, the board was informed through weekly updates and they approved the next steps. The board in Piper ISD was open and ready to move forward and one board member served on the strategic planning committee. Dr. Iker shared that board relations were important but challenging to navigate.

> [Board relations] was a really important piece as well. I did learn from my Victory ISD experience. I didn't bring the board in early enough. On this one [Piper ISD], where I actually had a board member on the committee, that was great, and sent the board regular updates from the work that was happening. We still had a board member say, "What's happening with the strategic plan? Where are we?" Just trying to strike that balance, get that [board relations] just right, it's more art than science.

Dr. Iker stressed that this was a very important step, especially being new to the district. He explained that managing the relationship with the board of trustees is key to the success of a superintendent regardless of tenure but entering into a strategic planning process that requires financial and human resources depends on a board that is ready and supportive.

Purpose and Philosophy of Strategic Planning

Dr. Iker explained that he and his team intended to create a framework that would guide the work of the district, but not consist of pages upon pages of information that would sit on a shelf like many administrative documents and typical strategic plans.

> What we were looking for was to create a very nontraditional strategic plan because in my experience, strategic plans get adopted, create fanfare, and the first year there's a lot of paying attention to it. Then, it kind of all falls apart…Our big goal was…we wanted a plan on a page…something that says this is who we are as a system.

What came out of the process was a *plan on a page* that looks very much like an infographic because it visually represents the major pieces of the plan so that they can be identified quickly and easily. This *plan on a page* illustrates the vision, five focus areas, and three strategic priorities. There are several supporting documents that provide additional information related to the plan, but they are in the form of short, pamphlet-type documents versus a three-ring binder or other typical strategic planning document.

One part of the supporting documents is a description of the three primary ambitious metrics and indicators of success. These measures are broad and center around three ideas: graduating with a plan, making academic growth, and student and community engagement. In addition to the ambitious metrics, there are three guiding documents: *Intentional Leadership*, *Portrait of Graduate*, and *Effective and Innovative Teaching and Learning*. Each of these documents provides key characteristics and actions for the corresponding group of people that support the vision of Piper ISD.

Dr. Iker's primary purpose for conducting the strategic planning process and keeping it simple was to align the district vision and mission to provide clarity and direction for everyone in the organization.

> We have all these great people and they're doing great things, but everyone is pointing in different direction. If we're going to be successful and make something happen, we all have to point our arrows in the same direction. Having a vision isn't enough. You've got to have something that people can hook on to with their actions and tie it back to that vision. Now, we have a lens through which we ask the question, how does that [strategy] relate to our shared vision and our strategic priorities?

Dr. Iker and his team believed that taking their district through this strategic planning process would help them unite the district as one and begin to move everyone in the same direction by defining their shared philosophy and values.

External Facilitation Firm

Before beginning the process, Dr. Iker and his leadership team determined that it would be a good idea to hire an outside entity to help guide the process for a couple of reasons. First, none of the leadership team members had direct experience facilitating a strategic planning process, and second, they felt that having an outside entity would bring a level of credibility to the work. The agency they hired had also conducted Dr. Iker's entry survey and matched his intent to develop a nontraditional plan by bringing in a methodology they felt was grassroots and flexible enough to meet their needs.

> Then [external firm] kind of brought this idea of Google Sprint. It was clear, and my chief learning officer and I both, we're very grassroots oriented too, we kind of wanted to lead it, but we thought it might be good, since we've never done this before, let's bring in somebody who's done something like it. I was nervous about it. Once we got into the work, interestingly, once we got the methodology, that notion of Google Sprint, and they have five specific stages they go through, I would be very confident we could lead it internally in the future.

Having an external facilitator allowed Dr. Iker and his team to participate in the process without the perception that they were trying to steer it in one direction or another. Dr. Iker shared that Google Sprint had five specific stages in its design process that the external facilitator took them through: (a) understand, by inviting the right people into the room; (b) sketch/diverge, by brainstorming all possible solutions; (c) decide, by reviewing all ideas and come to consensus

on the best options; (d) prototype, by testing without spending a lot of time or money; and (e) validate, by getting feedback on the design from people outside the group. The process typically takes 5 days in a business setting and the Piper ISD team used that time frame but spread it out over five different meetings.

Identify Stakeholders

Considering the changing demographics of the district and the aim of the superintendent to develop a nontraditional *plan on a page*, one of the most important steps in the process was to identify stakeholders who represented the demographics and diversity of the district well. A call to the community yielded almost 700 respondents to the application process. The external agency helped narrow the field to 70.

> One of the most important actions is to get a wide breadth of people involved on the front end. We ended up using an application process, using the map to make sure that there was representation across the district. This is one of the beauties of having a third party. They looked geographically, they're completely neutral. They don't know any of these people. They just kind of assigned them based on responses and we were looking for somebody who would be willing to think innovatively. Based on some of those responses, they gave us a first list. Then cabinet took a look at that. We did ask the board if they knew anybody that they would nominate, and we ended up with four or five from them. Ultimately, we got 70 folks, traditional players and nontraditional players.

By involving both traditional and nontraditional stakeholders in the process, people who had formerly felt disenfranchised were given a voice. Dr. Iker and his team saw this as an important step toward uniting the district around a common philosophy and vision.

Develop a Shared Vision and Focus Areas

Before getting deeply involved in the act of planning and strategy development, Dr. Iker and his stakeholders worked together to develop a shared vision and focus areas to support the vision. He stressed that in order for a strategic plan to be successful, it has to be built around something that the community values so that they own it and want to see it happen. In addition,

the teams identified the five focus areas for the district that would inform their work together. The vision and the five focus areas make up the center of the *plan-on-a-page* infographic.

> We did some vision work, worked a lot on our shared vision that first semester, then launched in January with a new shared vision in Piper ISD that every student in Piper ISD enrolls with potential and graduates with a plan. There we go, we are on a page. These are all the things we've created…that we collectively created in the school district, very intentionally, with lots of input this past year. It starts with our shared vision and tied to that was this mission. We've talked about these five areas that we needed to focus on in order to bring this vision to life.

The five areas were (a) *personalized plans*, which essentially provide for a guaranteed and viable curriculum that provides a clear path to success for every student; (b) *high expectations*, which refers to a focus on providing engaging, rigorous instruction and experiences that build character; (c) *equity*, which intends to meet the needs of each student at a personal and academic level in order to close educational gaps; (d) *leadership*, which aspires to recruit, retain, and grow excellent leaders who build and foster quality learning environments; and (e) *continuous improvement*, which promises to engage in an ongoing cycle of feedback that fosters partnerships and a culture of learning.

Planning Meetings and Facilitation

For the strategy planning portion of the process, the 70 people were divided into five teams that worked independently of each other and met about every other week for five, three-hour sessions between March and May. The teams were charged with developing strategies that aligned with the vision and five focus areas. At each meeting, Dr. Iker, his team, and the external firm set the stage by reminding everyone of the vision and purpose and then turned the work over to the facilitators. Principal supervisors, who served as the team leaders, were trained in facilitation and the goals of the sessions.

> We always read a portion of the *Innovator's Mindset*, and I did some reflective questioning of them. They talked at their tables just to get their minds engaged in that

> direction. Then we turned them loose with the work. The facilitators, we had to make sure they were well versed in what the big plan was for that session. That took some pre-work, obviously, to make sure that folks were all on the same page. We would send stuff out in advance. Largely, they ran themselves. We kind of collected things. Our [external firm] helped us with that to populate things to a common place and beyond that, it was really just following through, making sure that they had access. Meeting only five times, 3 hours at a time, is a pretty low amount for creating a strategic plan.

Through these five meetings, the external facilitators and the leadership team took the group through relevant portions of the Google Sprint design process. Artifacts and information were collected along the way that eventually culminated in the final products.

Feedback, Listening, and Communication

Throughout the process, Dr. Iker made a point to keep the rest of the community involved by asking for feedback, listening to concerns, and communicating progress along the way. He explained that this was important to ensure that the smaller group was keeping aligned with community desires and that everyone who wanted a voice had an opportunity to be heard.

> Now we did, all 700 of those people, we very purposely kept them engaged in the work. We had a blogger, a retired English teacher from Piper High School, who took meeting minutes, but it was really more like a blog. We sent those out to everybody who had applied. Whenever we had the community look at the work, we individually sent that work to everybody who had applied to make sure they had their voice heard. Then, when we finished the thing, we sent that out to everybody as well.

Some of the feedback even changed the plan. For example, some students were concerned about the proposed idea of standards-based grading and how that would affect them. So, in the feedback sessions, they shared their concerns with the strategic planning team members. Many of the committee members had not considered the potential unintended consequences and, thus, revised some aspects of the proposed strategies.

> Between session three and session four, we pushed out all the plans to the community and asked for feedback [via the Web, focus groups, and face-to-face conversations]. We had over 2,000 pieces of feedback on the plan, including about, I think the majority of it, roughly 50% were students, commenting on the plan…So we went to an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. We brought that back and then we had

> students from each of those levels. We had students come to the next session with the strategic planning team. They actually sat, each team had three students or more assigned to them, and they had to present their plans to these students and get feedback…That student voice changed our strategic plan.

Dr. Iker shared that getting feedback was valuable because it allowed people in the community who were not directly working on the plan to still have a voice in the final product. It also allowed the teams to know whether they were on track and still aligned with the wants and needs of the community.

Strategy Development

Strategy development happened continuously through the five meetings as the teams were hammering out the best ways to successfully realize the vision and the focus areas. Near the end of the process, a smaller design team worked to synthesize work of the groups into strategic priorities.

> Ultimately, where we got to was this. In the last week, the five groups each came up with these different strands and then there was a little design team that got together and looked at all of those things they had created. We called that our *design lab*, so all these cool strategies that we could do, but they had some themes that we pulled out. Each of these groups had these great ideas. They would have like 12 great ideas, but then to try to make that in to these three pieces was a little design team, that the [design team] just went through and read all of them, trying to find common themes.

After organizing the work into three strategic priorities, the design team sent it back to the committees for feedback to make sure they were meeting the intentions.

> Then we sent these three things and all the ideas back to everybody on the committee and said, "Look at this. Did we capture it? Is it right or is it wrong?" We got some very poignant feedback, some things that were missing. We made sure and revamped that. The challenge is you have 70 people on a team, but 70 people can't make those final last calls on the final cut when you're trying to narrow it down to something. That had to be a smaller group.

Through this smaller group, Dr. Iker and his team hammered out the final products that were then taken to the board for approval and communicated out to the district and community in

written and electronic form. The three strategic priorities were (a) cultivating talent, (b) reimagining learning, and (c) building community.

Link to Action and Progress-Monitoring

After the completion of the strategy development and feedback process, Dr. Iker and his team began having conversations and developing department-level plans with specific strategies aligned to the five focus areas and three strategic priorities. Campus leaders also began developing specific plans aligned to the larger district plan.

> So, what are your three to five big actions that your department is taking that relates to this? Then we'll share it out in cabinet, because it's really important that we see linkages always, and that's what the campuses are doing, they've been working on with their leadership teams. So what you've got, that is why *iterations* is such an important noun for next year. We're going to have these different iterative processes going, to see where are we seeing success instead of us thinking we have the answer to what it should look like.

Dr. Iker calls it an iterative process because he believes in the concept of taking risks and learning from failure, which is highlighted in the guiding documents that accompany the plan. These guiding documents include the *Intentional Leadership*, *Portrait of Graduate*, and *Effective and Innovative Teaching and Learning*. He and his team believe that this is key to the notion that the district is a learning organization.

> I have spent intentional time the whole year preaching the concept of failing forward because people in education are so scared of messing up, making a mistake…[therefore] failing forward is very specifically called out in our *Intentional Leadership* and *Portrait of a Graduate* documents…because we are going to have iterations, that assumes some things are not going to work, so you have to reiterate it. But, if you say this is the only thing that works, and it fails, so we drop it and move to something totally different, you've lost the concept of everything you've learned in that iteration.

The Ambitious Metrics and Indicators of Success will help guide decision-making around whether strategies are producing the desired outcomes. One of the shared vision documents states that there are three primary measures: "Every student graduates from high school with a

plan. Every student makes at least one year's growth every year. Every indicator in the student and community engagement indicator system is at the highest level."

Progress-monitoring takes place at cabinet meetings, administrative meetings, and campus visits. The cabinet meets once a week and the principals, department chairs, and other leaders meet once per month. A focus on the shared vision and progress-monitoring the strategic plan are central to these meetings. In addition, campus visits allow central office to have ongoing conversations and checkpoints to monitor progress.

> So whenever we go and pop in on campuses, we say, "How's it going with this?" They're able to articulate what the measures are they're looking at, what their strategies are that they're working on and then we can go see. I call it self-accountabilities because everyone knows we're going to have the conversation around it [the strategic plan] so that it's on people's minds and they continue to try to iterate and do some new things.

Ultimately, Dr. Iker stressed that the three things that were most important in the Piper ISD strategic planning process were (a) developing a shared vision, (b) involving a wide breadth of people, and (c) finding a way for the team to connect to each other prior to starting the process.

Dr. Derek Cash—Kent ISD

Move Purposefully and Be Authentic

Dr. Derek Cash has been the superintendent of Kent ISD for all of his 8 years as a superintendent. He served as a principal in the district, moved on to other upper-level leadership roles in other districts, and then returned to Kent as the superintendent. He was involved in a strategic planning process in a large, urban district in which he served as an area superintendent over a group of schools.

Kent ISD is classified as a major suburban district in Texas and currently serves more than 13,000 students with more than 20 schools. The student demographics are majority White

with Hispanic, Asian, and African American populations following in size respectively. About 25% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. While Dr. Cash shared that the majority of schools were doing well when he arrived, several were not, and the district as a whole was not moving in the same direction.

> Eighteen schools and they were all pretty good, a couple of them weren't very good, but we were doing 18 different things, going in 18 different directions. Because of the strategic plan we started the work of trying to get everybody moving in the same direction and we wanted to make sure we accomplished several things. But one of them was to make sure that we had an educational opportunity for every kind of kid that we had.

Dr. Cash shared that some of the most important changes that have occurred in Kent ISD have been as a product of the strategic plan. They have added specialty schools, including a dual language school, STEM school, an online school, and an early college high school. More importantly, instruction has shifted district-wide from teaching to learning with a focus on student voice through strong feedback systems.

> So, most of the changes have been because of the strategic plan…most importantly to me, we have totally changed our instruction and across the district we focus more on learner-centered instruction rather than teacher-centered instruction and that culture took a while.

Dr. Cash shared that the change in mindset and the freedom to be innovative and creative were important developments that happened as a result of the strategic planning process.

Entry Plan and Board of Trustees

Like Dr. Iker in Piper ISD, Dr. Cash conducted an entry plan when he began as superintendent in Kent ISD. He spoke with a wide array of stakeholders and the information that he gathered indicated that most people wanted to see a clearer direction in the district.

> [The entry plan] really works and I've shared that with every person I have come across that is headed into the superintendency or into a new superintendency. So, it's just a methodical way of gathering feedback from the community, from trustees, from your campus administration, district administration, parents, students, community members. And when I embarked upon the entry plan, it was really clear that people were frustrated

> that there were so many tentacles of people going different directions instead of everybody going in the same direction.

Before moving forward with the strategic planning, Dr. Cash presented the findings of his entry plan to the board of trustees and received authority to move forward with the process.

> I started [as superintendent] in June, I had the entry plan from basically June to August, reported back to the board in August. They gave me the go-ahead to start looking for some help with the strategic plans, we did that in August and September and actually started with our planning process in October, then brought a document back to the board first in February and then approved in March.

Once he had board approval and data from his entry plan that indicated a need, Dr. Cash got his team ready and hired an external firm to help them facilitate the process.

External Facilitation Firm

While Dr. Cash hired an outside facilitation firm, he and his team were heavily involved in the process. This was due in part becasue they wanted to move more quickly in the process than the firm. Also, Dr. Cash had a strong level of confidence in leading the process due to his prior experience.

> So the first thing we did was contracted with a company to come help us administer how we wanted to build the strategic plan…We didn't want to rely completely on our outside help, except sometimes you need somebody that is not a familiar face to say things…The strategic planning group that we used wanted to take a lot longer, but I knew where we needed to go [based on the entry plan] so we just moved…and my confidence level was really high [for leading the process] because I had just come from [another district] where we conducted a strategic plan and I had seen the power of everybody pouring in the same direction.

While Dr. Cash and his team wanted to move the process of creating the plan along a rapid timeline, they did not want to create a typical three-to five-year plan. Their philosophy was that the plan needed to be longer-term than only five years to provide for deep and authentic change.

> We gave the strategic plan a name, you know, LEAD 2022. LEAD stands for Leading Excellence and Action Driven. And 2022 because we didn't want it to be a 3-year

> strategic plan. We wanted an opportunity for change to really sink in and to be authentic and so it's a 10-year plan. Fortunately, I have been here the whole time because you know lots of times when superintendents change, directions change, and strategic plans change…We've been patient and we've been expecting deep and meaningful change in our organization. A lot of people raised their eyebrows and said, "Oh, that's just too long, we've never heard of a strategic plan that's a 10-year plan." So now, 8 years later, or 7 years later actually, people are going, "Wow, we're glad we had some time to focus on this. We didn't feel like we rushed."

Ultimately, the external firm was involved in helping develop the strategic plan in the first year of Dr. Cash's superintendency in Kent ISD. From there, the plan has been the compass that he and his leadership team used to guide the direction of the district.

Developing Strategic Priorities

Kent ISD already had a vision and mission that centered around inspiring, encouraging, and empowering students to achieve their full potential by being the best at what they do. Therefore, the first steps in the strategic planning process involved gathering key stakeholders and focusing the work through developing strategic priorities that aligned with the vision and mission. The idea was that these priorities would provide the parameters in which campuses and staff could be creative and innovative.

> I did not want a check-the-box kind of strategic plan…because most people want to say, "Well, I am doing this strategy and I want to do it by this day, and then I'll be able to check it off and I can move on to something else." And I'm not sure that would have been good for this district, because it takes a little bit of creativity, it takes a little spontaneity out of what you think you can do. And it gives people a false sense of, "Well, if I did that then I'm getting better." So, we wanted some strategic objectives and we didn't want very many of them, but we didn't want a check-the-box kind of strategic plan.

The strategic priorities include personalized learning plans, moving from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction, use of relevant technology, college and career readiness, and citizenship in a global society. Dr. Cash's intent was that this process would bring the district together and moving in one direction with parameters that would still allow for creativity.

> To me, it's about taking an organization and putting everybody on the same page. There's a graphic that stands out in my mind where all the different schools are pointed in different directions, are all working hard, our teachers are working hard, but that's not moving forward strategically. To me, it's getting everybody with the same language moving the same direction, toward the same goals generally. With freedom in there to be able to accomplish those in a different way, and having periodic checks about where we're going, and being real, having a lot of fidelity to the big ideas. And then having the creativity to have the little things, getting those things done, be able to be flexible enough to be different. For every school is different, every community is different, and so we should have a lockstep type of way of getting there. To me the people who created it have it get to that point.

The minimal number of strategic objectives allowed Dr. Cash and his team to focus on communicating the larger concepts of student-centered instruction and innovation while allowing for campus leaders and teachers to be creative at the more detailed level. The important change was that they were speaking a common language and beginning to move in the same direction.

Identify and Involve Stakeholders

Dr. Cash emphasized that identifying and involving a representative group of stakeholders was an important step in the process. These people helped develop the priorities discussed in the last section. A group of 35 was assembled with input and participation from members of the board of trustees, district leadership, campus leadership, and the community.

> Well, it started with a couple of trustees—there were two of them—and then we had some district leadership that I chose. Then we asked different principals to give us some ideas about who might be a good thinker as far as strategic planning and innovation goes. Who gets involved in the school that was willing to spend the time doing that. We had to make sure we had a diverse group of folks that mirrored our district, and then we wanted to make sure there were community members who are well represented including different faith-based folks. So then we gathered a group of about 35 individuals from all over the community, including kids and parents and teachers and administrators and board members, to kind of help focus the work.

Dr. Cash explained that most of the people who were on the strategic planning team came to every meeting and, overall, he felt they were well-chosen. The group was representative of the district and the community.

Planning Meetings, Facilitation, and Feedback

Dr. Cash and his leadership team organized the process with a point person from senior leadership and other staff members mixed into the teams to help facilitate and keep record of the work. The district members served to listen, take notes, and synthesize the conversations. The process began by gathering input from a larger number in the district.

> Our deputy superintendent at the time was the main point person. Then in each of the other groups…we had staff members assigned to synthesize that work, along with a community partner, so we had like two people that were leading, one was a staff member, one was a community member…[The larger group] included about 300 community people that came in and gave us feedback about where they felt like that we wanted to go, and they really got into the work. I mean, it was challenging, there were a lot of ideas, a lot of head-butting, a lot of arm wrestling about where we were going to go…we did a lot of listening, a lot of note-taking, a lot of trying to synthesize what people were really saying, and then trying to categorize where the different points were that people were bringing to the table.

After gathering feedback from the larger group, Dr. Cash, his team, and the external facilitator led the smaller group to develop the strategic objectives/priorities. Through the process, the teams reviewed a variety of issues including internal factors, such as how they wanted to design the student educational experience, external factors over which they had little control, competition, and other critical issues facing the district. The smaller committee used his information, along with the feedback received from the community, to develop the strategic objectives/priorities.

> We had a group of 33 that would take the feedback and try to categorize where people went. Then we kind of landed on our strategic objectives and then brought people back in and they got to choose which ones of those that they wanted to work on. And then every Wednesday, for about six or eight Wednesdays, we met and just began the work, the hard work of trying to get 35 or 40 people in a room to agree on something. Then we just got into the work of responding to the feedback from the other folks as we went. So we developed our strategic priorities from the feedback and then it's kind of meet over here with the big group, meet with the small group, meet with the big group, meet with small group.

Even with an outside facilitator and a superintendent experienced in strategic planning, Dr. Cash explained that the process had its challenges. Managing the ideas and opinions of more than 30 people required patience and attention. Through the process, the team took notes to document the conversations so that they could synthesize the information into themes, which helped them generate the major objectives and then move into strategy development. In addition, some people were less than open to the ideas that were being generated.

> So it's just a lot of conversation, a lot of just feedback and trying to keep the train on the tracks. Because it's really hard...and 33 people doesn't sound like many, that is a lot of folks to try and get going in the same direction…The biggest roadblocks were internal mindsets and it just took a long time and a lot of conversation, a lot of professional development, a lot of reading, a lot of conversation, to try to move people. But it was a strange thing our community was ready to go, and the staff members, not everyone and I'm generalizing. But one of the roadblocks that was internal mindset was, I believe, the biggest road block at the time, it's the biggest strength that we have now.

Through the process, those individuals' mindsets changed and became an asset to the organization. Dr. Cash explained that there were many well-intentioned and smart people who needed to spend some time reading the latest research and looking at how other districts and schools integrated technology and created specialized programs to meet the needs of students. Those people were given the time they needed to do that research. Dr. Cash explained that some of the people who were the most resistant at the beginning turned out to lead some of the most amazing work in the past few years.

For example, a principal who was initially somewhat closed to the ideas and concepts that came out of the strategic plan later was the person who decided to implement a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) program in his school. The principal's idea stemmed from the strategic priority of getting students more engaged because his school was one of the lowest performing in the area. Now, the school has a waiting list for students from across the district who want to participate in the STEM curriculum and is performing very well.

Strategy Development

Strategy development in Kent ISD has been a slow process on purpose. Once the strategic priorities were in place as parameters, district and campus personnel were expected to learn about what those priorities meant and be creative. While each strategic priority has an action plan attached, Dr. Cash talked about how the most successful actions and strategies started from an idea in the field that was sparked by the strategic plan and started small.

> Every time that we've had something be successful, it has started small and grown, so one of our other strategic objectives was to move from a teaching platform to a learning platform in our classrooms. At first, we had to define what that was and it's really confusing, and people were accustomed to go into a training and saying, "Okay, now I know what it is and so now I can do it and it's an easy kind of thing." And you can check the box, "Okay, now I'm in the learning platform and so let's move on." That's not the way that it works and so it has taken us a long time and we really started small. So we really set the conditions where people could be creative and then supported them in that work through the types of activities that we wanted to have in a strategic plan for every classroom. So it's a little bit different way of looking at a strategic plan, and some people would say is not a strategic plan.

An example Dr. Cash shared was the slow roll-out of technology integration. The leadership team decided to identify willing participants through an application process and then train small groups of people to effectively integrate technology into classroom instruction. The first cohort started out with about six of the 900 teachers in the district. Dr. Cash explained that this slow process was modeled after Project Red, which advises leaders to start small and get processes in place before rolling out large scale changes. The second year, 30 teachers were trained. The plan is to monitor outcomes and move forward from there, according to Dr. Cash. This slow, bottom-up approach allowed for deeper learning that promoted sustainability versus surface learning that could be swept away with the next initiative.

In addition to the parameters set by the strategic priorities and the "go slow" philosophy, cost is another consideration that determines whether a given strategy will be implemented.

> We have really frank conversations with principals saying, "Okay, we're not adding staff, we're not adding a bunch of money, how are you going to make that happen? Go back and you figure out how you're going to make that happen."

Due to high property values, Kent ISD returns a portion of its revenue back to the state every year. Therefore, there is not a large amount of discretionary funds for new programs or staff. This, in concert with the budget crisis that was happening in the early years of the strategic plan, required repurposing of staff and available resources in creative ways.

Link to Action and Progress-Monitoring

As mentioned before, each strategic priority has an action plan attached and those action plans are made available on the Kent ISD website. The action plans are relatively open-ended and contain a cost-benefit analysis. Dr. Cash explained that the work is primarily led by district staff and campus leaders.

> So [the link to action] starts with central office staff understanding what it is that we need to do, so somebody's got to lead the work. And most of the time the good kind of work that you need to happen in the classroom is led by our content folks, led by our curriculum and instruction side in concert with our leadership. So it starts really in August with our administrative retreat, and it's all focused around…the kinds of things that we need to work on for the year. And getting principals accustomed to seeing that, you know principals need to lay the foundation for the work.

He emphasized again that the intent of the strategic plan was to foster creativity and innovation in the work, which it has. As illustrated earlier, even some of the internal staff who were somewhat resistent in the beginning have come up with great ideas that have resulted from the strategic priorities.

> We try to stay open to any kind of creativity, and we've asked people to be creative. So to me, looking at the creativity in our classrooms, the creativity on our campuses, all of the programs that I've mentioned earlier, you know how many of them I've brought to the table? Zero. We have set the conditions to where people are thinking outside the box and knowing that the learning platform's important; knowing that infusing technology in what way is important; knowing that extracurricular activities are important; knowing that student engagement is important…They've developed all of these different programs, to me, through our strategic plan. Even though we don't have a thing that says, “Begin a

> STEM school at [ABC] elementary," check, we've done it. We didn't have that [in our strategic plan], but we had a principal come to us and say, "You know I've been thinking about the student engagement thing, and it would be good for our campuses if we had a focus."

Dr. Cash explained that progress-monitoring the strategic plan is an ongoing process and has multiple layers. He reports to the board every 6 months on specific metrics, he and his team walk campuses and observe instruction through an instructional rounds process, and highlights of the strategic plan are communicated on the website.

> So, every 6 months I report to the board the progress on the strategic plan. We use large metrics, like how many kids are involved in extracurricular activities at every campus, how many kids are involved in advanced courses at every campus, how many kids are involved in taking Algebra One in eighth grade…We have instructional rounds [classroom observation learning walks], and I mean it's not like we're not having data but it's a different kind of data. So maybe it is a little bit more qualitative. I think that relying on a number is dangerous, especially we haven't relied on STAAR data at all [to measure strategic plan success]. Because it's not meaningful, it's just one test; what's more meaningful is what happens the other days in the classroom…and so we've had to just really look at ourselves in a critical way and say, "We've got to do better." We have just tried to stay away from the mandatory typical check-the-box kind of mentality and it's worked for us. I don't know if it worked for anybody else, but it's worked for us.

Dr. Cash offered several pieces of insight that were important to the success of engaging in a strategic planning venture. The first was to get to know the community, know the research, then establish multiple feedback loops, follow through on tasks, and finally, allow for some creativity. He has seen these things work for him in Kent ISD as the district is now moving together in a positive direction.

Dr. Mateo Leon—Dayton ISD

Learning and Growing in the Same Direction

Dr. Mateo Leon was the superintendent of Dayton ISD for 9 years. Prior to that, he served as an executive leader in Dayton ISD and was a superintendent in two other districts for a combined total of 17 years as a superintendent. Dayton ISD is a suburban community serving

more than 16,000 pre-K–12 students in 20 schools. Dayton student demographics include more than 60% White, with Hispanic, African American, and Asian students respectively. Nearly 25% of the students are economically disadvantaged and 7% are English Language Learners.

> When I initially went [to Dayton ISD], they were a suburban rural community on the east side of [Urban City] and were predominantly Anglo, high achieving, affluent community, bedroom community. We had probably 4 or 5% free and reduced lunch. We probably had 5 or 6% percent Hispanic population and our demographics changed over those 17 years. When I retired, we had around 14,000 students and about 25% were free and reduced lunch and the Hispanic population was about 18% to 20%.

Over the 17 years that Dr. Leon served Dayton ISD, the school district grew from 4,500 to more than 14,000 students. This caused tension because there were some people in the district who wanted it to stay small, but the progression of urban sprawl made that impossible. During his tenure, Dr. Leon conducted several strategic planning processes in the district predicated on the fact that the district was growing rapidly. The first was primarily a strategic facilities planning process.

> The first one we did was in the mid ‘90s, and we were a small rural community, let's say 4,500 students, and we were making that transition to be a high-profile suburban district because our demographers predicted that you guys are fixing to grow, and you have a chance to really shape this community and so forth. We had challenges, which are normal in a growing area. Half the people were old [Dayton], grew up there, and half the people were new, wanting the best. We built a new high school and after that process, what came out of that is that overall, the community really wanted to be a high-profile suburban district.

The most significant outcome from the facilities planning process was the construction of the second high school in the district. It was one of the most technologically advanced schools in the area at the time and was beautiful, according to Dr. Leon.

> [The new high school] had Terrazzo floors, the amenities were great, the classroom sizes, the technology, just everything was really, really nice. And made a statement that is who we are, and that was kind of a real defining moment because [the community] wanted us to build it because it made a statement about how important education is to this community.

The second strategic plan focused on the nuts and bolts of instruction related to things such as teacher training, parent involvement, and the general instructional program.

> Then about five years later, we went through another strategic plan, and what we were focusing on is students…Now we're talking about our instruction program, how we have to get teachers ready, what kind of training, the typical things you go through, and incorporating the parents in the process, incorporating the staff in the process, and getting our students involved in the process, so that was kind of a level two-type strategic plan.

For the third strategic plan, the leadership team wanted to take the instructional conversation to the next level and think about the future for students. To prepare district staff and the community for this, they held educational summits in the community and brought in national educational experts.

> And the third strategic plan that we went into, we tried to take it to a different level…really start focusing on what we want our graduate to look like and be prepared for…careers and critical thinking type things...so we focused more on technology, partnerships with business and higher education…we brought in people like Ian Jukes, Ron Clark, and Erin Gruwell because they are respected and could help us say, "Here's the future of education," and stimulate some thinking before we got into our next strategic planning process.

The first strategic plan was for 3 years and focused on facilities to answer the needs of a growing population. The next two plans focused on the instructional program. The second was a 5-year plan, followed by about two or three years of learning and growing time before they engaged in the last 5-year plan of Dr. Leon's tenure in Dayton ISD. While the focus of each plan was different, the process was similar.

Entry Plan and Board of Trustees

Even though he was already working in a leadership role in Dayton ISD when he stepped into the superintendent role, Dr. Leon conducted focus groups to gather information prior to beginning the first strategic planning process. While he did not call what he did an entry plan,

the premise is similar. His purpose was to collect information that would help guide his next actions as the new superintendent.

> What we did is we formed focus groups and had a curriculum, extracurricular, co-curricular focus groups. They didn't really realize we were setting them up for future expectations, but we just wanted to have the conversation, so they felt comfortable, they got to know us [the leadership team] as a people, as leaders, but we went from early childhood, special ed., special programs, college and career. We had all these different focus groups and we just started having conversations.

In addition to gathering information from district staff and the community, Dr. Leon took the time to visit with his board members and find out what their priorities were. His purpose in these conversations was to determine whether they were ready to embark on a process that would identify areas of improvement for the district. He explained that it is important for the board and the superintendent to be on the same page because things could come up in the process that are not so flattering.

> Well, I think the first action step that's important is that the superintendent and board have to be on the same page of saying, “We want a strategic plan. We want to get better.” When you start digging in deep like that, you're going to find some things that you don't do very well, and you have to be okay with saying, "You know, we're not doing very well." And whatever that area may be. If we research and so, hey, our kids going to college are, 30% of them are having to take remedial math courses to get in there, well that's not a good thing to discover.

Dr. Leon explained that he believes strongly in the team of eight, which is the superintendent and the board. Along with the time and financial commitment involved, the board and superintendent must be willing to be vulnerable and transparent with a focus on getting better through the process.

Purpose and Philosophy of Strategic Planning

Dr. Leon engaged his district in the strategic planning process primarily as a way of getting everyone moving in the same direction and speaking the same language. He explained that in a rapidly growing district there are many people with ideas about the best way to move

the district. Therefore, it was important to come together and define the values, principles, and goals that would guide them as a team.

> One, I wanted just to have a common purpose…a consistency of communication…I think sometimes we try to do too much, too quick, too soon. I wanted people to have a clear direction. So our district motto was, "A Common Purpose with a Unified Effort." Our strategic plan is our common purpose. We're all working on this. If it doesn't fit within this strategic plan, we're probably not going to do it. If it doesn't fit one of our principles, as I said student-focused, data-driven, research-based, and continuous improvement, we're probably not going to do it.

Dr. Leon explained that in his experience, organizations that do not have an established set of principles and a common purpose can flounder and remain in a state of disorganization and chaos. Without a common direction, one part of the organization may not know what the other part of the organization is working on and people operate in isolation and silos. He sees a strategic plan as a way to bring the various parts of the organization together so that they see the connection in their work and move forward together.

External Facilitation Firm

Dr. Leon chose to hire an external facilitation firm each time he engaged his district in strategic planning because he wanted to participate in the process instead of leading it. As a participant, he was able to share his opinion and provide clarity related to work that was going on in the district, district policy, or state law.

> I always chose to have an outside facilitator because I wanted to participate in the process. Now, I did get the opportunity to give my philosophical perspective of why we think this is important for extracurricular cultural activities. For example, we wanted 100% of our students participating in an extracurricular activity. Well why? Well, the research shows…they're less likely to be problem. They make higher academics. They go on to college…So I had a chance to give my educator's philosophy into the group, but it was more from an informational standpoint of why we thought this was important for us to move forward with.

In addition, Dr. Leon recommends hiring an external partner so that the superintendent doesn't have to know how to do everything. He explained that with an external facilitator, the

superintendent gets to be a learner, too. Also, having an outside person lead the process lessens the perception that it is the superintendent's plan. He explained that the stakeholders need to own the plan with the superintendent for it to be successful.

> I would recommend an outside facilitator so you don't have to be the expert in all things. You get to learn with them. You get to ask questions. You get to respond. Then it doesn't have, "This is Mateo Leon's strategic plan." No, this is Dayton ISD's plan, not my plan. There may be some things in there that I may have not put in there, but hey, the group wanted them. Let's go for it. So get an outside facilitator.

Dr. Leon stated that each superintendent should decide for themselves whether they need to hire an external facilitator within the context of their circumstances. He recommends it because, no matter how smart or experienced a superintendent is, having an outside person provides support and political cover for the superintendent and the board. It also helps the community feel a sense of ownership.

Identify and Involve Stakeholders

Dr. Leon wanted to hear every voice, so large numbers of people were involved in the process. He shared that it was especially important to involve the people who may have an opinion contrary to the norm.

> We had the basic design of the strategic plan, we probably had 300 community members involved…If somebody had a voice we wanted to hear what they had to say, whether they agreed with us, or disagreed with us, we respected their opinion, and we listened to them…teachers, administrators, a couple of board members, community leaders, chamber of commerce, city, county officials…PTA representatives…students…We actually went out and recruited…We all identified who our naysayers are and we respect that they disagree with us or don't like something, but we brought them into the fold and said, "Hey, just come be a part of it and learn. Learn with us and maybe you'll bring up something that we really have to re-evaluate. You may have a real valid point." And so we didn't shy away from putting no people in the room, so these were not all yes people.

Dr. Leon explained that actively working to make sure there is a representative voice from the beginning makes the selling of the strategic plan much easier later. Superintendents should hear what people think about the district and how it can be fixed. Involving the

community also provides superintendents with an opportunity to clear up any misconceptions or erroneous information that is out there. When the time comes to involve a lot of people, there needs to be a way for them to communicate their interest in being part of the process, according to Dr. Leon.

> The second thing is, how do you identify the stakeholders you want to be involved? And so we did that several ways. People could apply to be part of it as we advertised that we were going through this and we were wanting the community to be involved, so you can make [an] application. We went throughout campus principals; they know who their involved parents are and who are reasonable people and value education and support education and want the best, so we had nominations from our campus-level administrators. We also went through our PTA and PTOs… our chamber of commerce and the economic development corporation, which I was involved on both of their boards.

As they were going through the process of identifying stakeholders, Dr. Leon and his team ensured that the representation matched the demographics of the district and that business and community members felt welcome.

> So identifying who's going to be on there and make sure it's comprehensive and make sure that you've got the demographics of your student body reflected in your participants…if you really want a true strategic plan to get the voice of the community. We reached out to our senior citizens that didn't have students…a lot of them were hanging on until they could get their taxes frozen, but we got our senior citizens in so they could understand why we were doing what we were doing and why.

In addition to the large number of direct participants, Dr. Leon and his team offered an online survey for other community members to offer their voice.

> So no one was excluded…we had an online survey where anyone within the community—so I don't know how many patrons we had there in the district, 50,000—but we had an online survey that if you weren't part of the actual committee, you weren't part of the focus groups, you could still participate through an online survey, and so just trying to reach out and get every voice we could hear and see what they had to say.

Identifying and involving stakeholders was a top priority for Dr. Leon because he felt it was important to hear the diverse voices of the entire district and community.

Planning Meetings and Facilitation

The organization of the planning process involved taking the larger group and dividing the members into subcommittees. The external partner led and facilitated this process based on district information. The groups varied whether it was a facilities or instructional strategic planning process.

> And so we formed our sub-committees with this large group…you have a facilities sub-committee, you have a curriculum instruction, you have technology, you have maintenance and operations, you have buses, you know you have to have the infrastructure to support what it is you're going to do. Do you want monitors on your buses, do you want cameras on your buses, do you want GPS system on your buses? I mean, it just goes down to the *nth* detail.

Dr. Leon emphasized that the strategic planning process was a learning process. His expectation was that the teams dug into the research within each of the prioritized areas. For each of the strategic planning processes, the teams had to stay within the four guiding principles, which were (a) student-focused, (b) data-driven, (c) researched-based, and (d) continuous improvement.

> You guys are empowered as a group of 20 to go find best practices all over the country, what does the research show, because we had four basic principles that drove everything. We know we're going to be student-focused…data-driven… researched-based, and…trying for continuous improvement. Those four things, if we weren't doing one of those four, we weren't going to do it. So we charged those people to go out and do that research and find the data and find the best practices that were out there, and then when you bring all those people together they reported out to the groups at large, so now they got ownership, they've got personal stake in it and they want to make sure they've done their homework and done it well because they had some people that are going to ask some serious questions. So it was a good, healthy process for us. This is a learning, growing, continuous improvement session. So sometimes, you have to redirect the conversations. Most people in that kind of setting, the group will direct. You don't have to intervene. If you got one or two that may be a little leaning toward negative, you've got 50 that are positive. They just kind of drown them out and lead them on anyway.

The strategic planning process began with informational meetings and then moved into research meetings. Each team had a calendar, expectations, and goals. A district leader with

expertise in the specific committee area served on the team to provide content and context, when needed.

> We printed a calendar up early and we met every Thursday for the first month and all those were informational meetings, then the next month we'd meet every other Thursday, two times a month and those were research the data and best practices. And so every committee had a calendar of events and expectations and goals and outcomes by a monthly that they had to report back. And we had in our curriculum area, we would have our assistant superintendent of curriculum that she wouldn't facilitate the meeting, but she would be at every one of those curriculum meetings because she was a base of information. When we were doing the finance committee, our CFO was there, so we had content specific experts that could be there that we wanted to make sure they had the right information, we didn't want to have misinformation.

Community members served as co-chairs of the committees and they assisted with gathering the notes from each meeting.

Feedback, Listening, and Communication

Agendas, meetings minutes, and notes were posted on a website that was available for the community to view and give feedback. In addition, the external facilitator and district leaders held public forums to share the proposed recommendations so that they could hear from the public.

> We're in a public setting, so after we did all this and went throughout the process, then the company and I, we're holding multiple [forums] of here are our findings, here are some of the things we're recommending, and this is kind of the general direction. We're throwing this out to the community, nothing's been voted on, nothing's been approved, but this is kind of the direction we're heading.

Community members and others who were not directly involved in the process were able to follow the work via a website that the external facilitator managed. Committee members were asked to regularly communicate with their circles of influence to share the progress and get feedback.

> But the other thing that followed up the strategic plan, then after those public meetings, we went back, gave the feedback to the community or the 300 stakeholders at large, and all this has been on our website. You can go the website and follow all these meetings

> and all the subcommittees are posting all their notes; they're posting all their agendas, so they're posting all their conversations, so all that's going on at the same time, so anybody can keep up with what's going on throughout the community. But at the end, we come back and say, "Okay, here's kind of a draft of where we are and we need a consensus of this. We don't need any division." So the committee then recommended this to the board.

Since the plan was created as a team effort, the committee also participated in the presentation to the board for approval. Committee chairs from the community each shared their part of the plan for review and approval by the board.

Values, Beliefs, and Strategy Development

Dr. Leon emphasized that strategy development in the Dayton ISD process had to be aligned with the belief statements that the district had established. The committees in the strategic planning process developed the major themes and identified the best practices from the research that they wanted for their district.

> We have these belief statements that we believe teachers are the most important person to impact the life of a student. We believe in a kind, caring, nurturing, and supportive environment for students to go to school. We believe that parents are key contributors and supporters of education to make sure students are successful. We believe our business community needs to be involved to prepare our students for the workforce. If it doesn't meet these belief statements, then we are probably not going to do it.

While the strategic planning teams developed strategic priorities, the minute work of developing strategies and plans happened at the department and campus level. Leaders were given freedom to innovate and create the learning environments that worked for them within the parameters of the plan priorities and belief statements.

> Once the strategic plan is finished, now you have to bring it to life through your own district by your curriculum departments, your finance departments, your operations departments, your planning, designing, your policy, your communication departments…Then you start identifying, okay, what does that mean? What can that look like? And know what we did, which we thought was a good model? It went to the campuses and individual departments and they had to put the specifics. We just trusted our people. They got to identify [strategies] they felt like would work. We didn't really intervene on that. They had to submit them for approval. But it was more or less, if they submitted it, and we looked at it, if it made sense, it was an easy approval process. We

> trusted our people to execute that. I would tell you, we were very fortunate. They always exceeded our expectations.

Plans and strategies that were approved then became part of the work of the district and the campus.

Link to Action and Progress-Monitoring

Each campus and department developed an action plan with strategies that aligned to the priorities in the larger strategic plan. These plans and the progress of them were monitored formally and informally. Checkpoint meetings were held at each campus to monitor expected results.

> We had a meeting every fall, mid-fall, in usually November before the Christmas break, and then April, May, we used the state assessment results when it came out. And then at those points in time we met with every campus, their team, the principal, the assistant principal, their PTA leader, their grade level teachers, and we had about an hour-and-a-half, 2-hour meeting with each one of those. A mid-year assessment, where are we, here's what our benchmark testing shows, here's what we've done.

In addition to formal progress-monitoring, regular conversation about what was happening on campuses and departments helped the leadership team monitor how things were going. Dr. Leon stressed that the progress-monitoring was grounded in trust, shared vision, and a positive presupposition that people were going to take the appropriate steps to meet established goals.

> We trusted our leaders to [implement the strategies]. We empowered them; they knew they were going to have to answer the question of how they performed. They knew we were going to have those conversations. My leadership style was more asking the right questions. If I needed to be direct, I could be. Probably early in my career, that was more my style. But the older I became, the little more experienced I became, you get the right people to do the job. They all have strengths. You focus on their strengths. You give them the resources they need to execute and have a continuous dialog. There was nothing ever going to be a surprise to anybody, because I was always asking questions or on their campus. "Tell me all the great things you're doing."

While trust and a shared vision were important to realizing outcomes from the strategic plan, providing clear expectations was an important part of the link to action and progress-monitoring, Dr. Leon explained. The expectation was that leaders would try the strategies and if the expected outcome did not materialize, they would find the root cause and make the adjustment.

> We had another simple philosophy. If you clearly communicate what your expectations are, you give them the resources to do what you expect, you have a period of assessment that you can come back in—"How you doing? You need anything else?"—you have that type of reflection, and then you hold them accountable. Clearly communicate, give them the resources, check on them, see if there's anything they need, and the last thing you say, "Did you jump over the fence or did you not jump over the fence? If you didn't, it's okay, just tell me why. We'll figure it out and do something different."

One example that Dr. Leon shared was the addition of assistant principals at elementary schools regardless of the number of students. After evaluation, the intended outcomes were not there, so they changed course. Dr. Leon explained that the strategic plan was not a static document and through progress-monitoring, leadership can determine what is working and what is not and make adjustments. He maintained that even through the adjustment process, stakeholders need to be involved and the new strategies need to align to the strategic priorities and belief statements.

Dr. Leon shared several of the most important things to do when embarking on a strategic planning process, including (a) make sure the board is on the same page with the superintendent, (b) involve a representative group of stakeholders, (c) hire an external facilitator, (d) be willing to be transparent and vulnerable, and (e) do what you say you are going to do, work hard toward it, and if it can't be done, have a reasonable explanation and a plan for moving forward.

Dr. Yuri Noble—Finn ISD

It's About Strategic Thinking

With twenty-plus years as a superintendent in multiple districts, Dr. Yuri Noble has been involved in several strategic planning processes. Finn ISD, his current district, is a large, urban district serving more than 100,000 students in more than 200 schools. Seventy percent of the students are Hispanic, followed by African American, White, and Asian students respectively. Eighty-nine percent of the students are economically disadvantaged and 43% are English Language Learners. One of the most pressing changes in Finn ISD during Dr. Noble's tenure is the increased number of students who have left the district for charter schools.

His view of strategic planning over the years has shifted from one that is part of a formal process to one that instead values strategic thinking as part of a systemic way of doing business and includes regular review and revision. He defines the purpose of engaging in strategic thinking as one that helps a district know where it's going but provides an opportunity to be nimble in the face of ever-changing internal and external forces.

> Although I believe in strategic planning, people call it different things…I had an opportunity to go to [university in another state] and they had a seminar for superintendents. Part of the conversation… is that they don't tout strategic planning, they tout strategic thinking. They made the argument that very few people know what is going to happen 5 years from now, but most people know what they're going to be doing and what's going to happen a year from now. Every quarter, you review the next quarter so as you move along, things become much more clear. It's more about strategic thinking than strategic planning.

A focus on strategic thinking with systemic processes and procedures for regular progress-monitoring and action provides` Dr. Noble an opportunity to respond to changes in the environment more quickly than a more formal 5-year process offers.

Entry Plan, Board of Trustees, and Stakeholders

Dr. Noble shared that conducting an entry plan is key to which direction to go and who to include in a strategic planning or strategic thinking process. Even if a superintendent has worked in the district before, as Dr. Noble had, it is important to gather information again because environments and priorities can change.

> I've always used this entry plan and there are five questions that I use to help me make that decision: What is your expectation of the superintendent? If you were in my shoes, what would you do first? What do we need to do to make this the best district in the county, the state, the country, depending on the context? All three of those questions are asking the same thing, but I ask that to 100 people and it's just a way to triangulate what people are thinking. Based upon what the response is I get from that, helps me launch on where I want to go. Those are the "what" questions. The other two questions are the "who" questions. The "who" is where I ask, "Who are the most respected people on staff and why?" I ask 100 people that question: "Give me the three most respected people in the district, who are they and why?" Now I'm identifying who is going to help me on this journey. Then the fifth question that I always ask is, "Who are the external stakeholders that are critical to our future success?" That identifies the outside people that I need as we go through any planning process.

From this entry plan, Dr. Noble developed his priorities, identifies potential leaders and key stakeholders, and determines his next steps. Dr. Noble also learned from his year of experience that involving stakeholders, especially the board of trustees, is an important part of a successful strategic plan. While he identified his real stakeholders as the students, he knew that he had to listen to the priorities of the board and community.

> You need to have your stakeholders involved. For a superintendent, my real stakeholders are the kids. But for me to be successful with the students, which are my real customers, then I need to have a way to know where my board is, and the board is at the top of this triangle of success for me. They're stakeholders and I do have quarterly retreats, and we have opportunities where I get input from them. Then I have the staff and then I have the community. I interface with all of them as we try to put together our strategic things. You need to have you stakeholders involved, know what's out there.

Conducting the entry plan set Dr. Noble up with a large part of the information he needs to make good decisions about which actions to take next and who to involve in decision-making.

He explained that understanding the community and its priorities is key to the longevity and success of a superintendent. For him, that begins with an entry plan and is maintained through an ongoing process of strategic thinking, scanning the environment, and making adjustments along the way.

Purpose and Philosophy of Strategic Planning

Dr. Noble described his view of strategic planning, as mentioned earlier, from formal strategic planning to a lens of strategic thinking as an ongoing process. Nonetheless, his purpose for engaging districts that he led in the past through a more formal strategic planning process was centered around having a vision for where the superintendent, board, and community want to go as a district.

> [Districts engage in a strategic planning process] because you need to know where you are going. Because if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. You need to look at, these are performance metrics or improvement targets that we need to meet a few years from now. Those are important to have so you'll know where you want to end up…If you know where your current state is and where you want to be, then you develop plans to help you get there. That's why it's real important to identify where you want to be.

He explained that moving an entire district in the same direction can be a monumental task and a strategic plan can help guide the way. For him, it has always begun with data and an entry plan that helps one know where he or she is so it can be decided how to move forward.

External Facilitation Firm

While Dr. Noble shared that it may be important for a new superintendent to hire an external facilitator, his years of experience afforded him the knowledge and skills to manage the process in collaboration with his team and community. In certain circumstances, he may hire an outside firm because of the time commitment or to get a plan started, but primarily, he has relied on his internal system for managing the strategic thinking process.

> I used them [external facilitators] a lot more when I was inexperienced, but what I had to learn from them was how to involve stakeholders. Sometimes it depends on the context of the organization…External facilitators or external groups can be very helpful unless the person or the team has a lot of capacity within itself; then it's possible to do it internally. But, typically, it's better to have someone as a facilitator or resource to help you come up with a plan.

Dr. Noble shared an example from a previous district in which he used the external facilitator to guide the goal-setting conversation.

> I had a facilitator who would get the most recent six district goals. Because I needed to be present with the board as we were discussing this, I needed someone to be able to facilitate and monitor. It was our plan, we came up with the goals ourselves, but they help making sure that we had a product in the end. External facilitators or external groups can be very helpful unless the person or the team has a lot of capacity within itself, then it's possible to do it.

Dr. Noble's experience allowed him to manage strategic thinking and planning as part of the daily ongoing work of the district, but he recommended that a new superintendent should consider hiring an external facilitator to help guide the process.

Establishing Goals and Priorities

Dr. Noble described strategic thinking as a process that is on-going and systemic in nature anchored by a set of goals and metrics created in collaboration with the board of trustees. He and his leadership team reviewed these goals and the strategies employed to meet them on a quarterly basis.

> We came up with some goals, the board and I, came up with about six of them…The board got very excited about becoming a district of choice since we are now in such a fierce competition with the charter schools. If you know where your current state is and where you want to be, then you develop plans to help you get there. That's why it's real important to identify where you want to be…Quarterly, I have staff retreats, I have board retreats where we look at our latest data…If we are headed down a path that's not good, then we can make mid-course corrections and make adjustments based on the data that we see.

He explained that the district is required by the state and federal government to have a district improvement plan with goals and strategies that evolve from a comprehensive needs

assessment, but the plan is only the beginning. What is more important is strategically thinking and planning for what is known at this time and making adjustments in a relevant and timely manner.

> Now, we are required to have a district improvement plan. There are certain tenets of it we put together, but I no longer believe in having a 5-year plan and sticking to that 5-year plan. I now believe in having 5-year ideas and then every year adjusting those ideas based upon the changing circumstances that you have.

The priorities and goals established by the board and superintendent provide an anchor for decision-making in the context of a continuous process described by Dr. Noble.

An Ongoing Process

Dr. Noble explained that with an ongoing process, it is important that a superintendent pay careful attention to what is happening in the environment, regularly determine who needs to be involved in strategy development and decision-making, meet often to monitor and adjust the plan, and communicate in multiple ways, as appropriate. These things become part of a system that allows a superintendent to think and operate strategically. Some of the key strategies that Dr. Noble employed are (a) stakeholder involvement, (b) strategy development with stakeholder voice, (c) feedback and listening, and (d) communication.

Stakeholder involvement. Dr. Noble explained that stakeholder involvement varies based on the decisions that need to be made. Smaller decisions require fewer people, but larger decisions that impact larger numbers of people and systems require more involvement and more time to make the decision or determine the action.

> You don't need a committee to make minor decisions. But if it's a big decision, you need to get people involved and that impacts the timeline of when you involve people and at what point do you do that. I'll also meet with external people. I have a kitchen cabinet; I meet with them quarterly. I have a parent group; I meet with them quarterly. I have another community group. Throughout the year, I meet with people from different parts of inside and outside the organization to help me decide at what point now do we need to bring a group of people together to solve this problem.

Dr. Noble employs a schedule of regular meetings with various stakeholder groups that allows him to both hear from them and share important information from the district perspective.

Strategy development and stakeholder voice. Dr. Noble strives to make decisions and create strategies based on a process of consensus. He explains that this process can take time and sometimes it's messy, but the outcomes are owned by the group instead of just the leader and the fidelity to implementation is greater.

> You try to look at the best data available to see what impact as you make adjustments or corrections. But we don't deal with widgets, we deal with students. There's a lot of different resources so there is going to be a natural ambiguity to how do you make those decisions. You just try to make the best decisions available with the most people involved as possible…I tell my people all the time, command decisions are easy to make but hard to implement. Consensus decisions are messy, they take a long time, but implementation is much faster when people have their voice in it. It is a little bit messy, but as you make those decisions, you shouldn't be making those decisions unilaterally. You should be making them with a group of people that you have confidence in—that this is the best direction where we need to go, and this is why we need to change course at this time.

Strategy development in Dr. Noble's organization is a product of ongoing conversations with leaders and stakeholders based on the data gathered from the internal and external environment. Since it is ongoing, the timelines and specific processes for strategy development vary, but is grounded in doing what is best for students and is aligned with the goals and priorities of the district.

One example that Dr. Noble shared related to the desire of the district to garner additional resources through a Tax Ratification Election (TRE). A TRE occurs when the board of trustees asks the public to ratify an increased tax rate to bring additional funds to the school district.

> Right now, we're looking at additional resources. It's called a Tax Ratification Election, so I have to have outside people involved in that decision knowing that we make certain decisions at certain times. But to have the information that we need ahead of time, you've got to start on the front end. So a lot of timing goes into when am I going to get the right people, in the right room, at the right time to help us make these decisions.

> That's part of what the leader of the organization does and can only do that if you're thinking strategically. It you're thinking tactically or you're thinking about what's way down the road, then it's a different context at that point.

This example illustrated Dr. Noble's process of involving certain stakeholders in the decision-making processes based on the information and needs of the organization at the time. Because the TRE is a big decision, a large amount of time and stakeholders were involved in the strategy development process.

> [Who is involved in the strategy development, decision-making process and carrying out the plan] changes on the concept. If you're talking about the "what" that needs to be at the top level, the governance level, the board of directors, the board of trustees. If you're talking about the "how," that's a different team and that's key advisors, division heads, people that are responsible for resources and support and practitioners; those that are involved in the "how." It's contextual, depends on the issue that you're dealing with and also depends on the type of decision that you're making, or even a "when" decision. Because if our procurement department says we can't have access to that for a while, that has an impact on what decisions we make.

Dr. Noble described the strategy and decision-making process as ongoing, flexible, and systemic because it is part of the way he and his team conduct the work of the district.

Feedback and listening. Gathering input and information from the internal and external environment is key to the success of the organization and strategic thinking, according to Dr. Noble. He does this through his stakeholder groups, but also expects his leadership team to continuously listen and get feedback from stakeholders.

> You need to have people scanning the horizon about what are things that are happening that you need to be aware of. You need to find a way to capture those and incorporate those into your strategic thinking. Then have an organized way of putting that together on a yearly or a biannual process rather than wait and doing it for a long term of 5 years. If you have the stakeholders and you scan the environment, you can put your system together that way.

Weekly meetings with his senior-level team involve sharing information about the current state of the district and information gathered that would affect current implementation of efforts and initiatives.

Communication and politics. Dr. Noble explained that communication is a critical component of his system. The type of communication and method by which things are communicated depends on the urgency and complexity. As superintendent, he must be aware of the situation and how to communicate because everything has political ramifications.

> Every Friday, I send my school board an update of what we're working on. That's part of my communication strategy. This is what we got coming down the road, this is what happened last week. Part of that is how you systematize how you operate. It works differently for different people, but experience is a great teacher in that. Certain things, though, they're of the crisis nature and only one person can communicate and that's the CEO. The board members know if they get individual calls from me and not through my staff members, they know it's a bigger issue, more of a crisis nature. Crisis communication is different than normal strategic communication.

In addition to regular and crisis communication, Dr. Noble discussed the complexity of explaining the "why" when an adjustment to the plan has been made along the way. As a large urban district, his organization is often in the spotlight and highly political. Therefore, clear and accurate communication is vital.

> When you are the 800-pound gorilla and you got all the media attention and the newspaper and certain stakeholders want to try to make you stick to everything you said— "Well, back in July you said this." Well, circumstances changed and that's why we're going in this direction. "Oh, well now you're flip-flopping, now you're being wishy-washy." A challenge that you encounter is explaining the rationale for why you either stuck to something or why you changed it. That creates communication challenges, it creates persistence challenges. Then other people will argue, "Well, there was no fidelity to implementation. You didn't let it work." When you didn't get the results, then are you going to keep doing something that's not working?

Another point that Dr. Noble made was the communication challenge explaining the rationale for a strategy that may be controversial or complex.

> Then there's also the complexity of trying to explain causal versus relational. When we did this and this caused A to happen, did A cause B to happen or was it part of the relationship of it that had an impact on it, but it didn't cause it to happen? That's also very complex when you're dealing with planning; so that communication, data analysis, resource allocation are all considered.

He shared an example of a situation where, despite clear communication and a logical rationale, the stakeholders did not agree, and the team was forced to change the strategy.

> When you have only a certain amount of resources and nobody minds if you give these people new resources, but if you only have this many and got to take them from somebody, then it becomes very complex and you're not in control of that and politics get involved in that. For example, I made a recommendation to close a school that was very small and underperforming, but I didn't get support, so we had to back off and go to a different strategy. Those are the challenges that come up as you're trying to make decisions and allocate resources, but you got to keep getting yourself up, dusting yourself off and go to another solution.

In this ongoing process of developing and implementing strategies, communication is a major part of Dr. Noble's work. He maintains that keeping his board and stakeholders in the loop with timely and accurate information is critical to the success of the strategies he and his team are attempting to implement.

Link to Action and Progress-Monitoring

Dr. Noble discussed progress-monitoring as a very important part of his strategic thinking process. He explained that it is important to meet regularly, look at available data, and make decisions about any adjustments or changes that are needed.

> I really believe in the quarter concept, and I do it with my team. Quarterly, I have staff retreats, I have board retreats, and where we look at our latest data. Some people would argue that some data is predictive, and I struggle with that because not all formative data will tell you exactly where you're going to be in a summative way, but it does help. It does give you direction and does give you some feedback, so if we're headed down a path that's not good, then we can make mid-course corrections and you make adjustments based upon the data that you see. I think it's also very important that you have multiple data sets and quantitative data; wherever you can get it is very important. But also have a qualitative data, it is very important, such as surveys about how people feel that are...As you're going along every quarter, if you're looking at that information, you need to make some adjustments.

Dr. Noble shared an example of how he and his team used data to evaluate two school turnaround strategies and make decisions.

> There is this, very specifically in Finn, and part of our planning processes, we're very proud of this one turnaround strategy that we call [Strategy A] and we had tremendous results in Year 1. Well, Year 2 results weren't quite as good, but yet we had this other turnaround strategy called the [Strategy B] and Year 1 there were just some improvement, but they got started late, but in Year 2 there were significant improvement. And we made decisions about Year 3 based upon Year 1 data, but now it changed. Did we make the right decision? Who knows?

Decisions were made in Year 3 based on Year 1 data and then the data changed. Because they were conducting regular data reviews, they were able to make adjustments that move schools in a positive direction. Dr. Noble shared that this illustrated the importance of not waiting 5 years to evaluate whether your planned strategies are working.

> That's why it's important to evaluate your plans as you go and that's why, if you'd have waited for Year 5, oh my goodness, we would have made some terrible decisions. You have to look at the information that you have and then make adjustments as you go along. But there are some deadlines because we have a fixed date on which we start our new budget and our new school year, so by July 1, we have to have these things done. By April, you've got to make decisions for July and that impacts your whole world. It's not linear, but it is important to look at all that data in a comprehensive way.

He also shared that hard operational timelines and deadlines can have an impact on strategy implementation. Therefore, progress-monitoring checks need to be held in alignment with those deadlines so that changes can occur, if necessary. That's why it is important to have many stakeholders and a strong team included in the process all along the way.

Dr. Noble shared that a new superintendent planning to embark on a strategic planning process should (a) conduct an entry plan to learn the community, (b) get stakeholders involved, (c) scan the environment to get feedback regularly, and (d) organize and evaluate on an annual basis at minimum.

Dr. Victor Braxton—Young ISD

A Crisis and a Short Timeline

Dr. Braxton was the superintendent of Young ISD for 7 years and it was his first time in the role. Young ISD is located in a city of almost 150,000 people—the largest city in the county. Nearly 25,000 students attend school in Young ISD on 33 campuses. More than 90% of the students are Hispanic, 72.3% are economically disadvantaged, and 30% are limited English proficient.

When Dr. Braxton entered the district, it was facing a major financial crisis and increased competition from charters and neighboring public school districts. In addition, many of the buildings in the district were in need of repair and many of the district's buses were more than 7 years old and did not have air conditioning. Therefore, Dr. Braxton and the board president decided that a strategic plan had to be put in place very quickly to address the many issues facing the district.

Purpose and Philosophy of Strategic Planning

Dr. Braxton began his tenure in Young ISD in June and, due to the urgent needs, worked with his board president to create a plan and timeline that would have goals and strategies in place by the time school began in August. Dr. Braxton was able to use the plan development process and the sense of urgency as a launch for beginning some of the work even before the plan was complete.

> This is a very short time period because I was wanting something when the school year started, not something as we got into the school year. So it was tight, because I got there in May. We were trying to get something out there in June, July…so as close to school starting as possible. A lot of it, I knew I could start executing anyway. It kind of gave me cover in the sense of there was this plan that was coming out, that will be constructed by the board, and that's why ... it's giving me a foreshadowing of ... so let's not wait for the plan to come out. Let's just do some of these. Let's just start getting this so we can get ahead of the game.

Dr. Braxton also was aware that he would be held responsible for the progress that the district made in rectifying the current situation. Therefore, he wanted the plan to be on paper so that everyone was clear on the expectations and measures.

> For my benefit of navigating through that crisis, was putting a plan together that would give us more structure around what was from the past, and what was mine. I was very cognizant of being held accountable for and held responsible for everything...and I needed to make sure that we put it on paper so that we know what we're working on…structurally because buildings had been neglected, at that time it was about four or five years since our last bond. That bond didn't do renovations or repairs...it just was new build, so they hadn't really touched buildings for 20 or 30 years. I knew that strategically, we had to put things in place for when we went out [for a bond] again.

Dr. Braxton's purposes for embarking on a strategic plan included creating structure for the work of the district to address urgent needs while also setting the district up for success in future bond programs and longer-term goals.

Entry Plan and Board of Trustees

Before beginning the strategic planning process, Dr. Braxton held individual entry interviews with each board member.

> I had an intro interview with every board member. That wasn't necessarily ... the strategic plan. That was just more to kind of get to know them at that level. [Before beginning the strategic planning process,] I went back to look at the entry interview, and I was making sure that whatever their points were of emphasis, that that's where we really covered those things.

From those interviews, he identified major themes that the board members identified as important. He noted that the themes were fairly standard and that most people would argue they were important to any school district.

> In that case, it's pretty much every board member's going to say the same thing. You want student achievement, they want fiscal responsibility, they want to ensure that students are safe, they want to make sure the parents have system transparency. There's a lot of common themes in there. You're able to work on those big common themes and say, "Okay, who's going to say no to students should be doing this? Or if we're going to have this kind of achievement, then teachers need to have to do this." No one's going to

> say no, publicly really. And stick to those ideas, versus something that you're going to have controversy around the people saying no.

In addition to finding the big themes during his entry interview, Dr. Braxton learned whether board members would be supportive embarking on a strategic planning process.

> And then there was a handful of new board members, so all that was coming together, and they were open to [strategic planning]. They were open to what we were trying to accomplish, academically, and fiscally was a big deal because that was crisis financially and school crisis.

Through his entry interviews, Dr. Braxton was able to identify themes to guide the district's work and ensure that the board of trustees was ready to undertake a strategic planning process.

External Facilitation Firm

Dr. Braxton did not use an external facilitation firm because of the urgency to get a plan in place, as well as his experience studying and participating in a strategic planning process in another district, which gave him confidence in leading the process. Nonetheless, he did recommend that a new superintendent who did not have the experiences he did should consider hiring an outside firm.

> I would say you need to figure out whether you can [facilitate strategic planning], or whether you need an external partner to do it. You have to use your smarts and your intuition to figure that out. Because some of that is like cover. I think part of that is cover for the board, cover for you, cover for you can say, "Hey, that was part of the strategic planning process."

Dr. Braxton shared that an additional reason for hiring a firm is to provide third-party validity to the plan of work that is produced.

Identify Stakeholders, Develop a Shared Vision and Themes

The strategic planning process that Dr. Braxton led his district through was different than many because the stakeholders involved only included him, his leadership team, and the board of trustees.

> Well, most of it really was just the board, and then the executive team kind of helped facilitate, because we were the ones going to have to execute. That was really the two. That one didn't include a lot of going out to the community. We just didn't have that kind of time. I think the crisis helped us say, "We don't have time to set something up over the next year. We need something now."

Dr. Braxton explained that he and his board president agreed that the urgency to get a plan in place meant keeping the number of people involved small. For Dr. Braxton, the process of creating a shared vision involved guiding the board to determine their current state and what they wanted for the district moving forward.

> Well, part of the process was to walk them through what we were, what we thought we were. Because when you have the seven board members, everyone has an idea of what they think we are. You have different…people have been there forever, some of them not…That was the first part, "What are we?" Then back to, "What do we want to be?" If we want to be that, what is it going to take?

The themes that came from this reflected what he learned through the entry interview process. The board wanted to focus on fiscal responsibility, student safety, student achievement, and parent involvement.

Planning Meetings and Facilitation

Dr. Braxton explained that since the primary people involved in the process were the board members, navigating the politics to make sure that everyone had a voice and trusted the process was highly important. In addition, he wanted to create a process that was about building on successes and moving forward.

> The bigger factor is trust. Building a conversation with each one of the board members, to ensure that it would be a transparent process, that they could trust that we were going

> to take everyone's ideas. At the first onset, there was kind of a white-board exercise. Everybody was going in with an open mind, and an open heart of what we were trying to accomplish. That was just kind of laying the groundwork. And, to build it, you actually have to get everybody reflecting. You have to get everybody in a room and ensure that you can move towards wanting to get to a common goal. Because board members, it can be tricky. When you review the history, you kind of point to pride, and these are all the things you are doing and, "Let's go back into all of our successes, and let's build on that."

The meeting and facilitation of the process was shared by Dr. Braxton and his board president. He explained that every leader has a vision and he wanted to make sure that his board president was able to guide the process in the direction he wanted to go while staying true to the shared vision and the areas of focus.

> There were a series of meetings that we all agreed upon. Of course, the board president, that's the first to step up and say, “Let's lay this out.” You stick with the board president saying, "What are you trying to accomplish in your board presidency?" so to speak. "What mark are you wanting to leave?" That was really the process. First of all is, what are we? What do we want to be? What's in our way that we can control? And what's just kind of in the way? Through all that process, we kind of laid it all out into educational issues, and then operational issues, and then staffing issues, and human resource kind of training, that kind of stuff. Financial issues.

One of the things that Dr. Braxton stressed was making sure all board members knew the process and felt they had a voice. He wanted it to be an open process where everyone involved felt like they could have input and a fair chance to share their ideas.

> I was very cognizant of that here in my past experience and ensuring that all of the team, the team that made the board members knew what the process would be, and that we were going to take everybody's input. At any time, there can be any edits; at any time, people could pull or push. That was a big one. You have to trust in the process, and that the process was going to be fair. That we were going to come out with a product that was going to be reflective of everybody's ideas, yet progressive enough to move us down the road as a district.

Since they were in a crisis situation and needed a plan quickly, Dr. Braxton explained that coming to consensus quickly was a primary goal.

> You set [meetings] up, and knowing that there's going to be several meetings to accomplish this. Very quickly, though, because we want to put a plan out that we can

> actually start working on. It wasn't a lot of extra meetings, but it was a few meetings for us to come to a consensus on, "This is what we need to do."

The Young ISD leadership team participated in the facilitation and Dr. Braxton summarized the process in the following way:

> First, meet with the board president, get the rest of the team going. You set up an executive staff to help facilitate, then you lay out the meetings, and then you have a very prescriptive agenda on what you're trying to accomplish. Come back with a plan, do the edits, then you come back with a formal plan that starts to get executed.

The Young ISD process, under Dr. Braxton's leadership, took about two months. The work began in June and finished in mid-August of Dr. Braxton's first year as superintendent.

Strategy Development

Strategy development stemmed from the common themes that the board and executive team developed. Dr. Braxton explained that he was careful in the strategy development stage to make sure that whatever strategies were included in the plan could actually be executed. As a new superintendent with a district in a crisis of resources, he did not want to stretch the capacity for successful action beyond what could reasonably be done.

> You're able to work on those big common themes. The challenge is that every one of those individuals has great ideas that they don't have to execute. You have to keep them within what can be accomplished or executed. But too, that they're not feeling like you're not listening to them. That's why I tried to stay with those big themes of student achievement, fiscal responsibility, operational efficiency, those big terms that who's going to argue with. You want to come out with saying, "Oh, yeah. That's something we can accomplish."

Dr. Braxton also shared that they aligned the developed strategies to critical goals. Many of the most urgent were those that directly impacted student success. This helped them determine which strategies would be included in the plan and which would not.

> [Prioritizing strategies] had to do, one, with what was low-hanging, and what was urgent. I still remember, some of it was low-hanging in the sense of ... student achievement is always low-hanging and I see it, but you have to put something out to let everyone know that you recognize that's our core business. Students have to be achieving at higher

> levels, whatever you determine it to be. Graduating more graduates, more at the college-level, all the catchphrases, and what is our moral imperative of making sure? That's another reason I purposely tried to minimize not having 10, five, eight, three, one more individuals from the external saying, "Here's four more great ideas." So that was very purposeful.

Dr. Braxton's purposeful decision to keep the strategic planning process within the confines of the board of trustees and executive leadership team helped keep the number of strategies to a manageable amount and allowed his team to work on these priorities for the first year.

Link to Action and Progress-Monitoring

The goals and outcomes of the strategic plan that Dr. Braxton and his team developed the first year became his superintendent evaluation. Therefore, it was directly linked to his work and the work of the district.

> That strategic plan actually turned out to be my evaluation. So everybody knew, okay, I'm going to hold myself accountable, too. This is how I'm going to hold myself accountable, so much so, I'm going to put it in my plan.

Dr. Braxton and his team worked together to map out how the goals and outcomes of the plan would be accomplished. Even though the community was not involved in the development of the strategic plan, he knew that they would need to communicate the plan and the progress along the way. Therefore, he and his team were intentional about being able to report the progress with data that were meaningful to the community.

> We started breaking it down on how much of this do we want to measure to, one, show progress, and two, be able to also report to the community of, "Look what we're going to accomplish over the next 5 years." It was a 5-year plan…over the next 4 years, you have to accomplish these numbers. We went back to...well, we also knew on the staff side of what numbers can we put out there? What's attainable within the next year? Some of it was progressive, some of it was gradual. We also looked at numbers to say, we needed to measure it, and we needed to have a fair measurement of what we were trying to accomplish.

The plan in Young ISD was progress-monitored at least twice per year as part of the superintendent evaluation. During those checkpoints, the board and superintendent reviewed what had been accomplished and what might need to be adjusted for the upcoming year.

> So every mid-term and every end-of-year, I was evaluated in all that we'd accomplished and see how it went in the mid-term. Every metric that as evaluated, that had data at the time, I had to report on it. Then at the end of the year, I had to report on all of the year. So that was one piece, and then we accomplished many, and added, and it changed. In my evaluations, they would say, "Well hey, why don't we add...let's just keep this as a living kind of document, and we'll add it, too." So it went onto the strategic plan, or it went onto my evaluation, which means it went onto the strategic plan.

Over the course of the 7 years that Dr. Braxton was the superintendent at Young ISD, the strategic plan changed to meet the current needs of the district. After the initial financial crisis was mitigated, the increase of charter school competition and the loss of students became the new focus that would be addresses through the strategic plan.

> After that, there wasn't much more crisis. After that first year or so, that everybody saw we got past all that, it was more about being progressive, and aggressive, and all the other…one thing that came about is we became the urban center. We started losing students at a higher rate than ever before. That became...yeah, you could say that was kind of crisis, but we were putting the strategic plan, trying to put things in place, and trying to stem that tide.

Dr. Braxton advised that some of the most important steps that a superintendent should take when planning to conduct strategic planning are to (a) meet with the board members and the board president to determine whether they are ready, (b) determine whether you can lead the process or you need to hire an outside facilitator, and (c) know the limits of your system.

Dr. Cole Nelson—Carlton ISD

The Community Frames the Plan

Dr. Cole Nelson has been the superintendent of Carlton ISD for 5 years. Carlton is a major suburban district that serves nearly 50,000 students on 55 campuses. The three largest student populations are White (40%), Hispanic (30%), and African American (9%). A little

more than 25% of the students are economically disadvantaged and almost 10% are English Language Learners.

Prior to taking the helm in Carlton ISD, Dr. Nelson was the superintendent in Kinsley ISD for 5 years. Kinsley ISD served more than 20,000 students of which 72% were economically disadvantaged, the majority (94%) were Hispanic and 31% were English Language Learners. He also served as a deputy chief of school leadership in a large urban district prior to his first superintendency. In both Carlton and Kinsley ISDs, Dr. Nelson and his teams were involved in strategic planning. He shared that the process was different in each district because it was driven by the community needs. In Kinsley, the district was in need of urgent improvement, so he described the plan as transformative. In Carlton, the community was very proud of their district, therefore the plan served as a method to unify and tweak versus making major changes.

> In Kinsley, we had high socioeconomic disadvantaged students, so transformation to them meant opportunities, shifts, doing things different. [In Carlton] our schools are valued by how they are now, that people don't see the need for that change. So I shifted from a transformation discussion to being more strategic in our need to change. We have a really great school system but how do we tweak them? So we talked a lot, during and after, how do we become a first-class district, a first-class district to a world-class district? And parents would then, they understood that piece because you're honoring the past by saying, "Hey you've got a first-class school district." But then you say, "Let's move it to a world-class." And all of a sudden, what that means is you have to change, just because everybody wants a world-class system how we define that, our strategic plan can assist us.

Dr. Nelson went on to explain that his view is that every school district probably needs a strategic plan, but the community frames the plan and helps to determine how to move forward and on what to focus.

Purpose and Philosophy of Strategic Planning

Dr. Nelson defined strategic planning as a guiding document that helps guide a district to their future. He described it as a way to involve the community in a transparent process that allows for their input and a shared vision.

> A strategic plan is a guiding document that is created or formulated as a result of how individuals see their district for future design, for future utilization, and so again, I'd call it a guiding document that will serve a purposeful move for the future of a district. And not having one, I think, I'm not going to say you're wandering aimlessly through the desert, I will say you're not wandering with the same purpose that is necessary or required at a time when faith in public schools is not increasing, its diminishing. So it'd be tough for me to say...I mean I'm glad we had that, I'm glad we're refreshing it, I'm glad that we allow citizen participation to come back and say, "Here's where we are." Failure to have that and it's almost like we're a closed system and it's not that at all.

He added that most people don't like change, but change is necessary to growth. A strategic plan that allows for collaboration and ownership can lead to consensus around the direction of the district.

> I don't know if there's many communities or anywhere or people in general that want change and change fast. So I think you've really got to take your time. Now, if you want to move fast, move fast purposefully. And if you move fast purposefully, then my question is, "What are your guiding documents for that?" And if after the strategic plan, then you need to begin the formulation and eventual adoption of that. Failure to have a strategic plan, I think, is detrimental to where and how you can lead and impact change in a district.

Ultimately, a strategic plan is vital to the work of a district and a superintendent, especially in the changing environment of school choice and competition, according to Dr. Nelson.

Entry Plan and Board of Trustees

Like most of the superintendents interviewed for this study, Dr. Nelson conducted entry interviews to gather information about the district and their priorities. From those entry

interviews, he learned that a strategic plan and a bond were two important items for the work of the district.

> And the way I knew that a strategic plan was something that they needed and wanted was that I do entry conferences. My first day, October 1, I began with entry conferences with board members, and then key principal stakeholders...I ended up with about 75 entry conferences to determine what that was...One of the questions in the entry conference with board members was, what are three priorities that this board would like their superintendent to focus on? Strategic plan, bond, and so on. So [strategic planning] came through as one of the top two priorities, so that's how I knew...and then when community, they said the same thing, but with regards to the bond, but they didn't even talk about strategic planning. They discussed the need for a bond and facilities.

Dr. Nelson realized that a decision had to be made quickly about whether they were going to focus on developing a strategic plan or preparing for a bond. He did not think it was a good idea to do both at the same time. The board decided on preparing a bond first as that was the will of the community.

> Since I've been here, we didn't have a strategic plan in Carlton ISD, and so what we did was, we looked at the need when I first got here…there was discussion of a bond, which we hadn't had in a fast-growth district for 5 years, so the discussion when the board hired me was fairly quickly that we needed a strategic plan, and I said, "We really do need a strategic plan"…but I'm hearing that we also need a bond, and so they said, "Yes." We knew we needed a bond. We hadn't had one for 5 years, and we had grown to 36,000 students by that time, so I said, "Well, time out. I think we're talking two different things here. We have a very educated electorate, and if we want to do is secure a strategic plan, that's what we need to focus on first. If what we want to do is pass a bond election, I think then we do so after the passing or the developing of the strategic plan. Well, the priority from the board was, we need a bond and so that's what we did. I said, "Well, then, at this point the strategic planning discussion doesn't need to occur. Let's focus on preparing for a bond." So we put a Citizen's Bond Committee. I got here in October. Citizen's Bond Committee formed in November. Eventually, a bond was passed the next year.

Dr. Nelson went with the board decision to prepare the bond first even though he thought it might be wiser to do the strategic plan first because he was new to the district and the board was closer to the community. There also were board elections coming up that impacted both the order of the process implementation and the timeline for the strategic plan.

> And so [after the bond passed], they said, "Hey, now we can talk about a strategic plan." I said, "We can." "However, it will take us three to six months." The thoroughness that we need. Anyway, the bond passed in May of the last year, and the discussion came back to strategic planning. However, there were going to be four seats up for the school board. I said, "As a result of four seats, we should bring this to the board in August," because it's May and you don't do a lot of planning...It would actually be October, November. The timeline would have been to bring it for the board adoption of the strategic plan in November or December. I said, "With that in mind, if individuals are elected..."I said, "This was not my strategic plan. I think we are better equipped to address that by saying we will address the strategic plan in January. It's the start of a new year, and we can come through and then determine what it is that we're looking for."

Dr. Nelson recommended that every superintendent take the time to determine what is best for their community and district. Some may be able to conduct strategic planning and prepare a bond simultaneously or be in a position to develop a strategic plan that guides bond decision. The important message, according to Dr. Nelson, is to learn from the community because they are the ones to whom the school district belongs and their support is necessary when making decisions and taking action.

External Facilitation Firm

The division within the board in Carlton ISD was one of the reasons that Dr. Nelson chose to use an external facilitator for the strategic planning process. While they were generally happy with his performance, board members did not find many places where they agreed with each other.

> This board was very divided, and they couldn't even agree on a process of how we go about [strategic planning], like choosing internal stakeholders, this, that, the other. So what we did was say, with the board president, if we had allowed the board to say, "This is how I see it," all seven would have had different ideas. Well, it turned out, the board president said, and it's good that he was able to say, "Give us an opportunity to work with somebody that can come in from outside to assist with this process, and we will definitely support that."

Dr. Nelson was able to hire the same agency that he used in his prior district to facilitate the process. He, his team, and the board are currently working on an update of the strategic plan and consulting with the firm for that as well.

> Sometimes people feel an outside facilitator allows what they believe is what's required for us to have a world-class type strategic plan. Some people might feel, and we don't believe that to be true, but at the same time [the external facilitation firm] is at a point where they've worked with us on the refining and the refreshing that I would say we've consulted with them but they feel very comfortable as well and according to the timeline that we have, they feel very comfortable that we can actually get to that.

Dr. Nelson and his team are updating or refreshing the plan in preparation for another bond election because he and the board want the strategic plan to drive the bond process.

Identify Stakeholders

Identifying a representative group of stakeholders was the first step in the process after getting final board approval to move forward. Dr. Nelson and his team identified internal and external stakeholders and the board members made suggestions. The final group was made up of 60–65 stakeholders including students, parents, community and business members, and district staff.

> Before facilitating, one of the things that we did was put a committee of stakeholders together, internal and external, and board members were given opportunities to give names of community members they wanted to select that would be part of the strategic design team, and that team would meet as it was being formed, that would be determined how many times they needed to meet based on what it was, the framework that we were following.

The stakeholders were contacted and were asked if they wanted to be involved. Some stakeholders participated in the strategic planning meetings while others were involved through specific focus groups. Dr. Nelson noted that it was very important to make sure that the stakeholders involved were those who could focus on the future of education. He also noted that

since Carlton ISD had schools within the borders of an adjacent urban city, representatives from those schools had to be a part of the process.

> I think the component of who are the critical stakeholders in the design team is important. You've got to have people that understand the need for some change or the future of education. We had a heavy influence of the chamber, Hardwick (adjacent urban city) chamber, the Carlton chamber because we have 19 campuses that are around Carlton and then Hardwick, 19 campuses that are Hardwick. You know, almost all of our schools from here to the [Hardwick city landmark], not all the way to the [Hardwick city landmark] but right before the [Hardwick city landmark] is really the swath of the district.

Two board members also participated in the process, which Dr. Nelson indicated was important because even though the board members did not get along well, these two could report back to the rest of the board with him on the process.

Develop a Shared Vision and Priorities

Carlton ISD already had a vision and beliefs that the strategic planning team chose to work from. That vision and those beliefs had been developed by the board and the community and they were not interested in changing it. The strategic plan was about taking that vision and moving it forward.

> Yeah, one thing about Carlton. The Carlton scene is a very progressive district, so there was a vision, but this allowed us to look well into the future to say, "What should our education look like 20 years down the road? I want you to dream and dream big," so the discussions were very good and fruitful, in that the end results that came from that were, I believe, a very forward-thinking strategic plan.

The external facilitator led the groups through a process to solidify their vision and beliefs, and then develop goals. Dr. Nelson shared the strategic planning documents that contain this information. The district beliefs centered around four areas: (a) the individual learner, who has diverse needs, deserves a variety of teaching techniques, and an equal opportunity to grow to their full capacity; (b) students should have access to high quality education; (c) district staff should provide quality instruction that is engaging, safe, and well-rounded; and (d) the district

will promote engaged and authentic partnerships with parents, community, and businesses to foster successful student outcomes.

From those beliefs, the teams developed eight goals that drove the remainder of the strategic planning process. Those goals were (a) implementing and enhancing innovative teaching and learning models, (b) consistent and equitable access to technology, (c) staff training that works to minimize disparities in the quality of education across the district, (d) personalized learning plans, (e) flexible learning environments, (f) planning for growth that will preserve the integrity of educational environments, (g) collaborating and aligning district organizations to more efficiently and effectively build partnerships with the community, and (h) form an alliance of those with a vested interest in Carlton ISD and its success.

Planning Meetings and Facilitation

The external facilitation firm organized and facilitated the process in Carlton ISD, but members of the central office team served on the committees as champions for their areas of expertise. From there came a series of meetings to develop the beliefs, goals, and strategies.

> We have process champions, which are central office folks who assist with the community stakeholders that were actually selected, and so what we did was had community meetings, where anyone was invited to share, "Here's what we're going to be doing. Here's our process. Here's our timeline if you'd like to be participating in various focus groups." So we didn't start focus groups, but we started with some community meetings, to say we were in the process of creating our strategic plan, and so we had probably four or five general meetings to say, "Here's where our timeline is, what we're going to need. Here's some of the things and feedback, some surveys, and some other things." So that started in January of that year.

Dr. Nelson explained that the process used by the external facilitator involved specific times, dates, and people who were involved. They took several days just to explain the process and make sure that everyone involved understood how things would progress so there were no

surprises. Dr. Nelson also mentioned that students were involved, which he was pleased about because their voice is important.

> That's where the [external facilitator] model is really a phenomenal process, because they spent 2 days from 7:00 until 10:00. Seven a.m. to 10:00 am, 2 days back and forth to say just that, what is it that they do and what are the things of all the things that we've come up with, so they had an elaborate process that allowed for stakeholders to understand the process completely...we had 13 high school students and maybe a couple middle school students as well. Students could tell us what was working, what was not, and so they all have given an opportunity to have a platform to be heard on what the things would make it, would be synthesized, and what wouldn't.

Having an outside facilitator manage the process allowed for everyone to be on somewhat equal footing and feel confident giving their input, according to Dr. Nelson. Even though he and two board members were there, they did not lead the process or purport to have the final say in decisions.

> Having the full board there would have had people say, "Well, let me listen to the board member." And the other thing that I think was really allowing this process to be pure was that the superintendent was going to be de facto. I would be there only to observe, if I needed clarity, but mostly the clarifying questions were answered by my chiefs and others that were there as district resource, but the 2 days of the final items that came through were amazingly succinct. There were 60 to 65 in that group and then a smaller group of primarily district people synthesized the work…The larger group trusted that the work of what they came back with would be reflected and if they needed more individual or smaller group…they came back to provide the next opportunity that I think we scheduled another meeting after those 2 days to say this is what where everybody came together for the final product.

The majority of the team planning and strategizing meetings took place over a 6-month period and most of the people involved stayed involved for the entire time period.

Strategy Development, Link to Action, and Progress-Monitoring

Strategy development took place after the goals were solidified. The teams were then able to focus on identifying strategies that could help them meet the goals. The eight goals were relatively broad to allow for innovation and creativity.

> We worked on our goals and what we came back with from all of the strategy sessions were what we felt were very progressive, and it allowed for us to focus on some really neat possibilities for our schools that allowed for some customization, which I think, [another district] has done a really great job with regarding some schools of choice. We consulted with [another district], with [another district], and other schools, and of course obviously schools of choice within our public schools, not partnering with charters or anything else, but I think for example our Goal 1, implementing and enhance teaching and learning models, just the fact that "innovation" is a strong word and makes it to Goal 1.

Examples of the innovative programming that came out of the strategic plan are highlighted in the strategic planning document that the district uses to communicate the plan and the outcomes of the plan. Some of the innovations in schools include science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual language programs. These programs were not explicitly listed in the strategic plan but were a product of the goals.

> Technology in Goal 2, Goal 3, creating flexible programming. So we were able to then create that or then come back from our goals and our strategic and specific action steps to then we focused on all 54 strategies—I think there were a total of 54 for our 5-year plan. So the first year, we may have highlighted 13 to 17 and then we measured how we did. Second year, we then for that year, we looked at some but then we started focusing on our bond package and looking at how that would fit within the strategic plan.

The 54 strategies are listed in a document under the corresponding goal. The strategic plan and the eight goals are used to guide the work of the district and create some parameters, but also allow for flexibility for ideas that may come up over time.

> [The strategic plan] actually allows you, if the question comes up that where does it fit within our strategic plan? If it doesn't, just because it doesn't fall possibly in a category a goal or specific result, can we make a modification because it's an important consideration? But because of the ownership at the time and the focus of the board, it actually has been a very good document… but it's all part of the strategic plan that said we would be inviting the creating of innovative programs.

At the end of the process, the external facilitator presented to the board the plan that included the goals and strategies in May of that year. The board adopted the plan.

> And so they came back, presented, and like I said, we had already been talking strategic plan six to eight months, January we formulated, we contracted with Engage and by April

> there was a presentation a preliminary final draft and there still were the strategic plan team or design team but then the board didn't vote on that final adoption until May. So it went from January to May. So that five, six months there was obviously where the crux of all the work had done for that.

The entire process took about eight months, with the planning teams meeting for six of those months. District staff, in collaboration with the external facilitator, synthesized the information into a final report with supporting documents.

Dr. Nelson shared the strategic plan document that lists the goals and corresponding strategies. This document is used in the progress-monitoring process. Strategies are highlighted a certain color based on whether they are in progress or completed. Due to the large number of strategies, Dr. Nelson and his team worked with the board to determine which they should prioritize in the work first. The strategies were then laid out in phases for implementation.

> The board also receives reports to say, “What is it that you'd like us to focus on?” through a board planning workshop and then staff reviews it. But before the board, the staff does and says, "This is what we're looking at and these are some things from input." And they might say, "Well, don't focus on that."

Periodically, Dr. Nelson and his leadership team report to the board on the progress of the strategies that have been prioritized.

Dr. Nelson offered thoughts on the strategic planning from his experience. He shared that it is important to (a) learn about the district and community and let them help guide how the strategic plan is framed, (b) make sure the board is ready to take on the process, (c) identify a broad representation of stakeholders, and (d) hire an outside facilitator to help guide the process.

In summary, each superintendent included similar steps throughout the strategic planning process, but the specific rationales and approaches were different. Further exploration of these similarities and their connections to the literature will be explored in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

This chapter is a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations drawn from this study that can add to the discourse around strategic planning in education as reflected in the literature. The findings are presented in three parts. First, I present a summary of the results of the research questions. Next, I discuss connections to the literature. Finally, I conclude the chapter with implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

Problem Statement

Strategic planning is a process superintendents can employ to create a clear roadmap for continued improvement (Chang, 2006; Cook, 2001; Fullan, 2001). Strategic planning is beneficial both symbolically and practically in an era of increased accountability and scrutiny of educational organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Lane, 2005). Strategic planning has been identified in the literature as an attributing factor to superintendent longevity (Villerot, 2014). The longevity of a superintendent and the accompanying district stability are linked to the successful implementation of school reform initiatives, as well as to improved student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2001). The gaps in the research indicate a lack of understanding of how superintendents implement the strategic planning process toward decision-making and action in K–12 education.

Purpose for Research

This study examined how superintendents used strategic planning to make decisions and take action in a changing educational landscape. Specifically, this study explored what superintendents with 5 years or more of experience identified as the key components of strategic planning and how they managed the process through actionable decision-making and goals.

Summary of the Study Methodology and Significance

This basic qualitative research study used semi-structured interviews to examine how six Texas superintendents with 5 years or more of experience used strategic planning to make decisions and take action in the leadership of their respective school districts. The participants in this study were selected because they met the study requirements and represented school districts in both economically disadvantaged and more affluent districts in various parts of Texas.

The snowball sampling led me to six male superintendents who served in either suburban or urban districts. Data analysis was an ongoing process that began with initial interviews with each of the participants using a semi-structured interview protocol. Transcripts were analyzed using a set of a priori codes as well as emerging codes that represented themes in the data.

This study's significance involved its ability to yield insight from the point of view of the leader practitioner. Superintendents with this perspective may help other educational leaders navigate the strategic planning process in this era of increased scrutiny and accountability. The qualitative methodology allowed for thick, rich descriptions that illustrated the nuances of each participant's experience and may provide additional insight for other school leaders.

Summary of Results

Research Questions

This basic qualitative study used an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm to answer the following questions.

1. What do superintendents who engage in strategic planning identify as key components to strategic planning implementation?
2. How do superintendents who engage in strategic planning mange the formal and informal processes?

3. What role do other factors, such as politics, environment, superintendent experience, and systems and structures, have on the strategic planning and the strategy formation process?
4. How do superintendents who engage in strategic planning link the strategic planning process to implement action and change throughout the district?

Factors that Influence and Impact Strategic Planning

Multiple factors were found that influenced whether a superintendent conducted a strategic planning process, what the priorities were in the process, and how the process was implemented. These factors include the information gathered about the district, including context, culture and needs, state and federal requirements, and the experience of the superintendent.

Information gathered through the entry plan process. Every superintendent interviewed engaged in some type of entry plan process when arriving in the position. The entry plan involved face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys that were sent out to a wider audience. Superintendents shared that the process allowed them meet and build relationships with the stakeholders in the district and the information gathered assisted superintendents in determining the needs and priorities of the district. In addition, it helped superintendents decide whether to engage in strategic planning, who were the important stakeholders, and what the timeline for strategic planning might be. Whether strategic planning became a formal and defined process or was embedded as a systemic way of doing business, the entry plan provided the superintendents with key information that informed their decision-making.

Board and community culture and context. All superintendents in this study indicated that awareness of the culture and context of the organization both internally and externally

helped to ensure that the strategic planning process was aligned with the needs and desires of the district. According to the superintendents, the context influenced how the plan and process were framed in communication, who was involved, the timeline, and other aspects of the process. Participants explained that the context of the organization often included the current and historical politics of the district and community, the impact of changing demographics, the fiscal and operational state of the district, increased competition from charter schools in a free-market environment, and other factors unique to the community.

How each superintendent framed strategic planning within the culture and context of the community was important. For example, a community that recognized it was in crisis and in need of transformation might be more open to a strategic plan that focused on radical improvements, while a community that perceived itself as relatively high-performing may be more open to a plan that emphasized efforts toward continued excellence and innovation. Since shared ownership of the plan was critical to success, stakeholders had to understand how strategic planning would meet the needs of their school district and community. Therefore, superintendents had to understand the culture and context and present the plan and process in a way that fit the dynamics of the district and the community.

The culture and context of the organization also influenced who would be involved in the process. One example that superintendents described was ensuring that the stakeholders involved in the process were a mix of those who had been a part of the community for years and those who had moved in more recently. Every superintendent in the study noted the board of trustees as key stakeholders. In some cases, board members were directly and exclusively involved in the process; in others, a wider group was formed.

Context and culture also influenced the timeline and structure of the strategic planning process. In one case, a financial crisis required a short timeline and quick action to redirect the district in a desired fiscal direction. In another, a longer timeline that allowed for deeper learning and slower change met the needs of the community. Finally, one superintendent argued that the ever-changing context of his environment was best served by an embedded and systemic process, meaning that he used the elements of strategic planning as an ongoing part of his decision-making process.

Needs of the district. The needs of the district were found to influence all aspects of the strategic planning process and affected how the superintendent proceeded. Community and school district needs, such as facilities, fiscal stability, instructional improvement, innovation, and a common direction, were mentioned by superintendents as needs that surfaced from the districts and communities. Most of the superintendents identified needs during the entry plan phase and used that information to inform the priorities and focus areas for strategic planning.

Requirements of the state and federal government. Many of the superintendents discussed that state and federal planning requirements influenced the strategic planning process at a compliance level. The state and federal governments require that all districts who receive federal funds prepare a district improvement plan with goals and strategies. The superintendents expressed a desire to meet federal and state requirements with their strategic planning efforts. In this vein, they wanted to create a plan that was in line with the intent of the law and supported authentic and sustainable improvement. While the requirements of the state and federal governments were not central to the strategic planning process in any of the districts in this study, they were identified as an influencing factor and a part of how strategy development was linked to the work of the district.

Experience of the superintendent. The superintendents interviewed varied in their experience with strategic planning, but all reported that their confidence in leading the process was a factor in how to proceed. Several of the study participants had previous experience either participating in or facilitating a strategic planning process and, therefore, had a vision for how the process would unfold. For some, having experience led them to use a similar process every time while others chose to forge their own path and embed strategic thinking within their decision-making systems. Those with less experience conducting a strategic planning process tended to rely on an external facilitator to guide the process to bring credibility and impartiality to the process. All the superintendents participated actively in the process and provided some level of leadership and direction, regardless of experience.

Key Components to Strategic Plan Implementation and Process Management

The study demonstrated that while the superintendents did not use the same specific strategic planning process, many of the key components were similar. Seven areas emerged from the data that outline the strategic planning process for these superintendents. These common components are (a) determining board and community readiness, (b) hiring an external facilitation agent, (c) identifying and involving stakeholders, (d) developing a shared vision, (e) determining priorities and goals, (f) strategy development, and (g) feedback and communication.

Determine board and community readiness. Each superintendent prioritized meeting with the board and community to determine whether the district was ready to engage in a strategic planning process and decide together how to proceed. Most of the participants stressed that meeting with the board first ensures that they are part of deciding how and when strategic planning will take place. The participants emphasized that every community and board is

different, and it is the role of the superintendent to work with them and determine how to move forward with strategic planning.

Utilize an external facilitation agent. Most of the superintendents in the study either used an external facilitator or recommended that new superintendents consider using an outside agency to help guide the process. Credibility and impartiality were identified as the two primary reasons for hiring an outside firm to facilitate strategic planning. Most participants did not want the plan to be seen as the superintendent's or the board's plan, so involving an external facilitator helped create a perception that the process was open, unbiased, and fair.

Most superintendents explained that they and their leadership teams still influenced the direction of the process and participated in order to provide information and clarity related to their expertise. Two participants did not use an outside firm. In one case, that decision was made because of the superintendent's experience and the utilization of an embedded process. For the other participant, that decision was made because of a short timeline for the planning process. Nonetheless, both recommended that a new superintendent should consider hiring an external facilitator for the strategic planning process.

Identify and involve stakeholders. Stakeholder identification and involvement were emphasized by the participants of the study as a critical step in the strategic planning process. Identifying a representative group of stakeholders provided for community voice beyond just the majority, constructive criticism, and a range of ideas and opinions. Stakeholders were identified in multiple ways including applications, recommendations, and appointments.

Three superintendents in the study revealed that they typically had a working group that ranged from 30 to 60 people. Some held forums, distributed surveys, and created other feedback sessions to include as many stakeholders in the process as possible. One superintendent had

around 300 people in his working group. For another, only the board and his leadership team were a part of the process. Regardless of group size, the participants in this study emphasized that identifying and involving stakeholders was critical to the success of the process because it contributed to the shared ownership of the plan.

Develop a shared vision. A key component in the strategic planning process that emerged in the data was developing a shared vision or aligning to an existing vision. The superintendents explained that one of the main reasons for entering into a strategic planning process was to move the district in a common direction. Therefore, creating or working from a shared vision was important. Even in those places where a vision and mission were already established and agreed upon, it still served as an anchor for the strategic planning process.

Determine priorities and goals. Each superintendent discussed a set of priorities, focus areas, and/or goals that were developed during the process that guided strategy development. The priorities and goals served as an aligned and actionable extension of the shared vision. Most were overarching and relatively broad in nature to allow for creativity and flexibility in strategy development.

In general, the priorities and goals were guides and parameters with the ability for the organization to learn and grow toward meeting them. In fact, four of the six superintendents described strategic planning as a learning process. In several cases, learning opportunities were embedded within the process so that district staff, the community, and the board could draw upon successes from other districts, educational experts, and research related to their desired outcomes. The purpose of this shared learning was to build capacity in the team members so they could use the learning to the benefit of their district.

Strategy development. The working groups developed strategies within the formal strategic planning process and district staff also developed strategies as an ongoing part of innovation within the districts. Most of the superintendents interviewed expressed a desire for creativity and flexibility in strategy development at all levels of the organization with the caveat of alignment to the established vision, goals, and priorities. Several of the participants explained that strategy development came because of the teams learning and growing through the process. One example of this was of a principal who was not entirely open to the idea of strategic planning and change when it was introduced. After participating in the shared learning and exploration of innovative ways to improve schools, he decided to implement a STEM program at his school to increase student engagement and academic achievement.

None of the study participants confined strategy development to the formal process of strategic planning. The superintendents explained that the goals, priorities, and strategies developed from the process served as both a jumping-off point and anchor for continued strategy development even when the formal process was complete. Staff members were expected and empowered to continue to create and innovate within the parameters of the vision, mission, and goals that were developed during the strategic planning process. In this way, the strategic planning process became part of the fabric of the district versus a static process that was checked off once complete.

The superintendents explained that determining which strategies would be implemented and when was an important part of the process. First, the strategy had to align with the vision, goals, and priorities. Second, it had to be feasible and within the capacity of the district to accomplish and sustain. Strategies were typically prioritized and included in a plan with a timeline for action. Most superintendents in this study viewed strategy development as an

ongoing process and some said that many great strategies were developed both during the formal process timeline and after its conclusion as part of the continued work of district staff.

Solicit feedback and communicate throughout the process. A key step in the strategic planning process, according to interviews, was finding ways to create two-way communication and gather feedback from stakeholders beyond those directly involved in the formal process. Most superintendents interviewed enacted some type of feedback and communication loop during the strategic planning process, such as a blog, surveys, community forums, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, board and staff retreats etc. The purpose of the feedback and communication loops were to present the work completed to date and gather input from people outside of the working groups.

In some cases, this opportunity to get feedback changed the plan because the people in the working groups were able to see the strategies through a different lens. For example, one superintendent explained that a proposed strategy related to changing grading practices was adjusted after receiving feedback from student focus groups mid-way through the process. Superintendents in the study expressed that the feedback and communication loops were a method of measuring the pulse of the board and/or community in order to confirm the process or identify areas in need of adjustment.

Linking the Strategic Plan to Action and Progress-Monitoring Outcomes

The superintendents in the study reported multiple ways that the strategic plan was linked to the work of the district, including district plans, campus plans, and superintendent evaluations. In addition, they discussed the different ways they monitored whether the intended outcomes were being realized. The superintendents reported both formal and informal methods for linking the strategic plan to action and monitoring the progress toward outcomes.

District and campus plans. The superintendents explained that goals and strategies developed during the strategic planning process were often included in district and campus action plans. Goals and strategies were assigned to departments and campuses based on whether the strategy directly impacted them and whether they had the expertise to carry out the work. Since strategy development was an ongoing process, the plans were described as fluid and flexible because the intent was that they were progress-monitored regularly.

Some superintendents shared that when strategies emerged outside of the formal process, they had to be approved before implementation. Typically, if the emerging strategy was aligned to the goals, priorities, and resource capacity of the district, it was given the green light. The new strategy then would be integrated into the campus plans and monitored for effectiveness in the same manner as other initiatives. Most study participants reported that they were open to ideas that developed at a grassroots level because of new data or new learning.

Superintendent evaluation. Another way that superintendents in the study linked the strategic plan to action was to include the goals and priorities in the superintendent's performance evaluation. Several participants noted that the strategic plan, or parts of it, were included in the superintendent appraisal. The rationale shared for this was that the metrics of the strategic plan and the metrics of the superintendent evaluation should be aligned to the vision, goals, and priorities of the district and be designed to improve the district. Therefore, the superintendent was held accountable to lead the district in a way that produced the desired outcomes of the strategic plan.

Progress-monitoring. Superintendents monitored the progress of goals and strategies in formal settings, such as board meetings; through informal venues, such as conversations with principals and other staff; and through written communication, such as tracking systems and on

district websites. Participants explained that both quantitative and qualitative data were reviewed and discussed to determine if the established goals were being met in the expected timeline. Appropriate adjustments were made as necessary.

Superintendents for whom the strategic plan also was part of their evaluation shared that the progress of the goals and priorities would be reviewed with the board twice a year at minimum as part of the appraisal process. Some superintendents voiced that linking the work of the strategic plan to their evaluation heightened the importance of the plan and the monitoring of its successful implementation. Others agreed, adding that linking the metrics of the strategic plan to their evaluation was warranted because the superintendent is the leader of the district and should be held accountable for outcomes. They contended that this practice intentionally aligns the success of the superintendent with the success of the district.

In addition to the superintendent appraisal process, some respondents indicated that available data were reviewed with the executive leadership team and the board on a regular basis. For some, this occurred during weekly leadership meetings. Others added that data were reviewed at quarterly leadership and board retreats. From these regular reviews, respondents reported that adjustments were made, assigned to the appropriate people, and communicated to ensure clarity in the organization.

Several superintendents mentioned that more informal progress-monitoring occurred through campus visits and conversations. Some study participants indicated that during visits to the campuses, they would ask how specific strategies were progressing and that district staff were prepared to answer appropriately. Others discussed observing classrooms as a method for monitoring whether certain instructional strategies were being implemented. Some superintendents referred to this as collecting qualitative data related to strategy implementation.

Several superintendents identified written communication as a method for monitoring and communicating progress. Some used a system for listing goals and strategies and a system to identify when the goal or strategy had been accomplished. In addition, several of the superintendents pointed to their website and/or materials that were produced to share the district's accomplishments so that the community was aware of progress made as a result of implementing the strategic plan.

Connections to the Literature

The findings of this study connected to the strategic planning literature on four major topics. First, the study confirms assertions from Mintzberg et al. (1998) that the culture and context of an organization impact how strategic planning should be implemented and, therefore, there is not one preferred way to conduct strategic planning. Second, the study findings indicate that the strategic planning steps that superintendents utilize are not entirely linear as Eacott (2008b) suggests in his relational model of strategic planning. This also supports the argument that viable strategy formation can occur outside of a formal strategic planning process (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). Third, the findings of the study reinforce the assertions in the literature that strategies must be aligned with a belief system, shared vision, goals, and priorities (Chang, 2006; Cook, 2001; Fullan, 2001). Finally, the study endorses the idea that engaging in a strategic planning process can support the multiple roles of a superintendent as described by Callahan (1966), Kowalski (2005, 2010), and Olivarez (2013), and potentially create an environment of district stability and superintendent longevity (Villerot, 2014).

The Role of Culture and Context

The idea of culture and context related to strategic planning was a thread through several of the descriptive schools of thought around strategic planning that Mintzberg et al. (1998) described. The learning, power, cultural, environmental, and configuration schools of strategic planning in the literature all alluded to the idea that there are unique characteristics of every organization that impact how they will respond to the change and structure that comes with strategic planning. Therefore, the leader of the organization must be aware of and sensitive to a multitude of factors when designing the strategic planning process (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Superintendents in the study identified that awareness and understanding of the culture and context of the organization was critical to the implementation of strategic planning. Because context was important, every superintendent in the study engaged in some type of entry plan in which they gathered information about the district before taking any major action. This process allowed them to learn about the context, culture, and priorities of the district before entering into a strategic planning process. From that learning and additional communication with the board, they determined how to approach the strategic planning process, including determining whether or not the district was ready, preliminary priorities and goals of the district, and how to frame the process in communication. In addition, they used information gathered to determine whether or not to hire an external facilitator, the timeline of the process, how stakeholders would be identified and involved and what feedback and communication loops would be used to create a level of openness, inclusion, and shared ownership.

These findings align with the ideas from the literature that a superintendent must (a) be aware of the power and political positions of stakeholders within the organization (Ikemoto, et al., 2014; Merek Paulsen et al., 2014; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Tekniepe, 2015), (b) understand

how the culture of the district impacts decision-making and resistance to change (Bredson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Tekniepe, 2015), (c) determine the influence of structures within the district that impact readiness for change (Buckley et al., 2006; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Wei & Yeh Yun Lin, 2015), (d) consider how an environment that fosters new and shared learning influences strategic planning (Dufour, 2007; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Quinn, 1980), and (e) be able to configure a process that is appropriate for the organization's context and culture in a given period of time (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Rialp-Criado et al., 2010).

All of the superintendents in this study were keenly aware of how the culture and context of the organization influenced their decision to engage in strategic planning and how the process would be implemented. In some cases, the process included only a small number of stakeholders and had a short timeline, while others chose to move more slowly and deliberately and involve many stakeholders. One participant chose to embed a system of ongoing strategic thinking, environmental monitoring, and data review instead of a separate and fixed strategic planning process in order to be more responsive to the environmental changes impacting his district. In all cases, the superintendents designed the strategic planning process in response to the culture and context of the organization.

A Flexible Process

Eacott (2008b) contended that the role of the superintendent in the strategic planning process is one of chief navigator and strategist. Therefore, a superintendent must understand the interconnectedness of the facets of the process, such as vision, communication, input, feedback, and implementation in order to recognize how to facilitate the process in the right direction at any given moment (Eacott, 2008b). This idea that the strategic planning process, and especially

the act of strategy formation, should be flexible is also illustrated in Mintzberg et al.'s (1998) explanation of his descriptive schools of strategy formation. He contended that leaders must act on emergent strategies that form outside of the formal processes and that these emergent strategies can develop in a multitude of ways.

The findings of this study indicated that superintendents valued flexibility in the strategic planning process because it allowed them to be responsive to changes in the environment and open to grass roots ideas. This was evident in that even though most of the superintendents hired an outside facilitator, they still worked with them to design and navigate the process. In addition, the superintendents created multiple avenues to gather feedback through the process and made adjustments along the way.

Several of the superintendents shared that they gathered feedback from specific individuals based on the content and context of the problem at hand. Some decided who was involved in the work of developing new strategies or implementing the work based on the complexity of the issue. In addition, the type and frequency of communication related to strategic planning and/or strategy formation differed based on the content of the message and the context of the district. These findings align with Eacott's (2008b) theory that the superintendent must decide when and how to move through the process in a flexible way that leads to the intended outcome of better organizational performance.

The superintendents in the study described multiple examples of viable strategies that were developed because of, but outside of, the strategic planning process. Several participants described this phenomenon as a product of the learning and mind shifts that occurred during and after the formal process. Others attributed it to the shared vision, goals, and priorities that participants took back to the context of their part of the organization and developed strategies

that were aligned and made sense for their microcosm of the district. These findings support the claim that viable strategies can and do emerge outside of the constraints of a formal strategic planning process (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

Alignment to Vision, Goals, and Priorities

Cook (2001) emphasized the importance of determining the organization's beliefs and values as an early step in the strategic planning process. The literature argued that while the strategic planning process should be flexible enough to allow for strategy development at multiple entry points, it also should demonstrate consistency and alignment with the purpose and core values of the organization (Cook, 2001; Eacott, 2008b; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

While the superintendents in this study explained that stakeholder input and the development of ideas from the field were important and desired, the strategies that were implemented in the work of the district had to be aligned to the shared vision, goals, and priorities that had been established. The participants described these as parameters that allowed for creativity and innovation in the broader organization. Several of the superintendents shared that when the teams knew, understood, and were vested in the vision, goals, and priorities, they were able to take initiative without direct supervision, but within the confines of those parameters.

Mintzberg et al. (1998) described this type of environment in the learning school as one that "opens the door to strategic learning" by acknowledging the validity of the "organization's capacity to experiment" (p. 189). He stressed that the learning should be guided by the leadership and designed as a collective experience so that the knowledge is shared (Mintzberg et al., 1998). Some of the superintendents in this study expressed a desire to create innovation in their district because of the strategic planning process. Others shared that the emphasis on

learning together through the strategic planning process had facilitated the changing of mind sets and had created an environment where stakeholders felt empowered to innovate and develop ideas that would improve their schools. In most cases, the superintendents found that the ideas and strategies were grounded in the vision, goals, and priorities that were established through the strategic planning process.

Strategic Planning and the Multiple Roles of the Superintendent

The literature delineates multiple roles and responsibilities entrusted to the superintendent, of which strategic leader is implied (Callahan, 1966; Eacott, 2008b; Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski et al., 2011; Olivarez, 2013). Callahan (1966) conceptualized the evolution of the four distinct roles of the superintendent from 1865 to the present. These roles are (a) the superintendent as teacher of teachers, (b) the superintendent as business manager, (c) the superintendent as statesman, and (d) the superintendent as applied social scientist (Callahan, 1966). Kowalski (2005) agreed that Callahan's roles had stood the test of time and added the role of communicator as critical for the modern superintendent. Olivarez (2013) organized the role of the superintendent into 10 critical functions:

> (1) governance operations; (2) curriculum and instruction; (3) elementary and secondary campus operations; (4) instructional support services; (5) human resources; (6) administrative, finance, and business operations; (7) facilities planning and plant services; (8) accountability, information management, and technology services; (9) external and internal communications; and (10) operational support systems–safety and security, food services, and transportation. (p. 12)

The findings of this study indicated that strategic planning supported the efforts of a superintendent to carry out the specified roles in the literature as well as confirming the established concept of the superintendent as a multifaceted leader with varied responsibilities.

The majority of Olivarez's (2013) 10 functions of a school district were mentioned or implied as part of the strategic planning process. Superintendents expressed fiscal, facility, and instructional needs as reasons to engage in the strategic planning process. In addition, participants shared that representatives from the various departments across the district were included in the process because it was important for the entire organization to be involved in the shared decision-making. The strategic planning process was identified in the study as a way for the membership of the district to work together toward common goals that improved the functioning and outcomes of the district.

The superintendent as a teacher of teachers. Throughout the strategic planning process, the superintendents demonstrated the multiple roles as conceptualized by Callahan (1966) and Kowaski (2005). Several superintendents shared that they worked through the strategic planning process to provide learning for the teams in a collaborative environment. In some cases, the superintendent or his team led the learning; in others, experts were brought in to share best practices. This exemplifies the idea that the superintendent is an instructional leader and, as Callahan (1966) described, a teacher of teachers.

The superintendent as a business leader. Several superintendents in the study explained how part of the intent behind engaging in a strategic planning process was to create an atmosphere of innovation in order to keep pace with competition from charter schools and neighboring public school districts. To be competitive, they had to think about all systems, including recruiting staff and students, building capacity within the organization, leveraging

community and business relationships, and innovative and attractive school improvement concepts.

In addition, the superintendents mentioned that they had to keep an eye on the resource demands of any strategy that was presented to ensure that it would fit within the capacity of the district or have a return on investment that made it worth while. This illustrates the role of the superintendent as a business leader who must attend to the operational and fiscal demands of running a school district (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Callahan, 1966).

The superintendent as a statesman. The literature suggests that the political acumen of the educational leader, such as building relationships with school board, community, and legislative bodies, is critical to the tenure of a superintendent (Kowalski, 2005; Russell, 2014). The role of the superintendent as a statesman implies that he is aware of the role of politics and the governance operations of the district and his responsibility to learn how to respond appropriately (Kowalski et al., 2011; Olivarez, 2013). Superintendents in this study stressed the importance of working with the board of trustees and the community through the strategic planning process. This indicates an awareness of the governance structure and the role of politics in the business of the school district and alignment with the role of the superintendent as a statesman.

The superintendent as a social scientist. As a social scientist, a superintendent must apply the concepts and theories of human and organizational behavior to best determine how to navigate the internal and external nuances that make up a school (Callahan, 1966). In addition, the concept of a social scientist implies that the superintendent uses researched best practices that support an organization with the capacity to experiment based on information that is gathered

both internally and externally (Chang, 2006; Eacott, 2010; Fullan, 2001; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

Superintendents in this study demonstrated an understanding of human and organizational behavior through their comments and decisions related to managing the strategic planning process. In addition, they expressed a desire to create an organization that was open to learning, innovation, and creativity within the parameters of the vision, goals, and priorities. Most of the superintendents hired, or recommend the hiring, an external facilitator as a means for conducting the process properly and impartially. This suggested a desire on their parts to implement the strategic plan well, to address any perceptions of a lack of transparency or fairness, and to promote shared ownership. The superintendents in this study embodied the role of a social scientist by demonstrating their understanding of politics, human and organizational behavior, and the culture of the organization when making decisions, which included how to engage in a strategic planning process (Callahan, 1966; Mintzberg et al., 1998).

The superintendent as a communicator. The conceptual role of the superintendent as communicator implies that he must set a clear vision, mission, and plan of action for the work of the school district (Bolman & Deal, 2008; G. Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Kowalski 2005; Lane et al., 2005). In addition, the superintendent is responsible for communication that supports a positive image of the school district (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2001). The strategic planning process provides an avenue for dialogue between superintendents and their school district's diverse stakeholders as they seek to influence or guide the strategic direction of the whole system (Espinosa, 2009).

Superintendents in this study described communication related to strategic planning through multiple lenses before, during, and after the formal process. Communication prior to the

onset of the process included development of the vision, goals, and priorities, along with the framing the plan and process. Several superintendents described communication during the process using words such as *two-way, give and take, dialogue, consensus,* and *compromise,* which indicated an openness to diverse ideas. Communication and messaging during and after the process happened through community forums, websites, and published documents that shared the products and progress of the strategic plan. The strategic planning process, as described in this study, provided a platform for the superintendents to dialogue with their teams and community to create a collective direction for the work of the district.

Superintendent Longevity and District Stability

The final connection to the literature involves the concept that the development of a strategic plan contributes to the longevity of a superintendent and stability of a district. Villerot (2014) studied superintendent entry plans and identified strategic planning as a next step and contributing factor to the longevity of a superintendent. Superintendent longevity is important to the stability of a school district and the ability to institute and sustain long-term reform efforts, which typically require a 5- to 10-year allotment (Fullan, 2001; Russell, 2014; Villerot, 2014).

All the superintendents in this study served in the role in a single school district for 5 years or more and conducted an entry plan process followed by a strategic planning process. Several of the superintendents credited the strategic plan with the ability to make improvements, impact culture, and set the course for the long-term success of the school district. In two of the districts where the superintendents interviewed for this study were no longer serving, the district had maintained the same vision and was working from the same strategic plan, or an extension of the plan, instituted by the participant in this study. In addition, one superintendent credited the implementation of the strategic plan with all the positive changes experienced during his tenure.

While this study did not find a direct correlation to the implementation of a strategic plan and superintendent longevity, there is some evidence of a connection. This evidence includes the fact that all the superintendents in this study served in a single district for 5 years or more and all have conducted a strategic planning process. In several cases, the superintendent had conducted multiple strategic planning processes and attributed his success and that of the district in part to the successful implementation of the strategic plan.

Recommendations for Further Research

Few studies exist that describe how superintendents conduct strategic planning from a practitioner's view. The literature suggests that there are benefits for superintendents who conduct strategic planning, such as providing a clear vision and direction for the district, longevity in the position, and district stability. Six superintendents were purposefully chosen for this study to provide a depth of understanding regarding how they engaged in the strategic planning process. Since all the superintendents were males in urban or suburban district in Texas, this study could be replicated with either all female superintendents or superintendents in rural school districts. In addition, the study could be replicated in another state to determine transferability.

Future studies could include perceptions of other stakeholders involved in strategic planning, such as board members, executive leaders, principals, or community members. This study could be replicated in the higher education arena. Another potential study could examine the specific outcomes, such as student achievement, of strategic planning processes. Finally, a study could look at progress-monitoring systems for strategic planning.

Implications for Practice

In the changing landscape of education, this study provides current and future superintendents with guidance on how to approach and engage in a strategic planning process. If implemented effectively, strategic planning can support a culture and system of aligned and collaborative work toward overall organizational improvement. Since there is some evidence that implementing a strategic plan contributes to superintendent longevity and school district stability, it makes sense for superintendents to investigate engaging their district in a strategic planning process.

This study suggests that the context and culture of a district are major factors in determining how strategic planning should be implemented. Therefore, conducting some type of entry plan or needs assessment supports effective implementation. Superintendents should plan to meet with the board and key stakeholders to learn about their perspective as to the needs, goals, and priorities of the district. The entry plan process, along with additional and intentional conversations with the board, should be used to determine whether the district is ready to engage in a strategic planning process and how the plan will be implemented.

Superintendents should consider hiring an external facilitator to manage the process in order to ensure effective practices as well as a perception of transparency and fairness. The study suggests that the superintendent should be actively involved in the design and direction of the strategic planning process to ensure that it aligns with the context, culture, and vision of the district. If an external firm is not employed to guide the process, the superintendent should develop and implement a system to manage, monitor, and review the process.

Superintendents choosing to engage in a strategic planning process should pay attention to the identification and involvement of stakeholders, how meetings are facilitated to include a

diverse representation of voices, and how feedback and communication loops are created to gather input from the larger community. These components help to create an open, transparent, and unbiased process that reflects the values and beliefs of the community.

The study suggests that the development or review of a shared vision is paramount to a successful strategic planning process. Therefore, this should be an early step the superintendent takes with the identified group of stakeholders. Once the vision is established and agreed upon, the teams can begin the work of developing priorities, goals, and strategies. Superintendents should ensure that the design of the process allows for the development of strategies outside of the formal strategic planning process and develop an approval process for these emerging ideas.

Finally, superintendents need to develop a process for monitoring, reviewing, and revisiting strategies and the plan as a whole. Regular review of strategies through the lens of outcomes and the changing educational environment will allow the superintendent and the board to make mid-course adjustments toward success. Strategies that are not working should be addressed through clear communication with the board to mitigate any potential political issues that would hinder needed changes.

Appendix A

Joanne L. Frantzen

Doctoral Candidate

Cooperative Superintendency Program

University of Texas at Austin

Superintendent Semi-Structured Interview Guide

District Size: _____(indicate number of students)

District Type:

_____ Rural _____ Suburban _____ Urban

1. How long have you been a superintendent?
2. How long have you been a superintendent in this district?
3. In how many districts have you served as superintendent?
4. Tell me about your school district and how it has changed over the past few years?
5. Tell me about your most recent experience conducting the strategic planning process?
6. What were some of the important action steps and processes?
7. Based on your experience, how would you define strategic planning?
8. What was the primary purpose for engaging your school district in a strategic planning process?
9. How confident did you feel in your ability to lead the process?
10. How did you decide who would be involved in the process?
11. What were some of your first steps in facilitating the process?
12. What were some of the things you did to manage the process throughout?
13. What were some other factors that you considered when preparing to conduct a strategic planning process?

14. How much time did you and your district spend in the strategic planning process?
15. What were some of the challenges involved in facilitating the strategic planning process?
16. What are some of the things that you feel you have to weigh and consider as you are deciding what strategies to act upon.
17. How do you connect the strategies that were developed through these processes to the work of the district?
18. What systems for monitoring the implementation and outcomes did you put in place?
19. Have you ever encountered or discovered viable strategies, ideas, or innovations outside of the formal strategic planning process that you felt would be important to implement? (ways to achieve goals that you hadn't thought of) If so, will you describe how that happened and how you managed it?
20. How often would you say that viable strategies develop outside of a formal process?

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